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WEST

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Vol. I. No. 1 JANUARY 5, 1926

WEST

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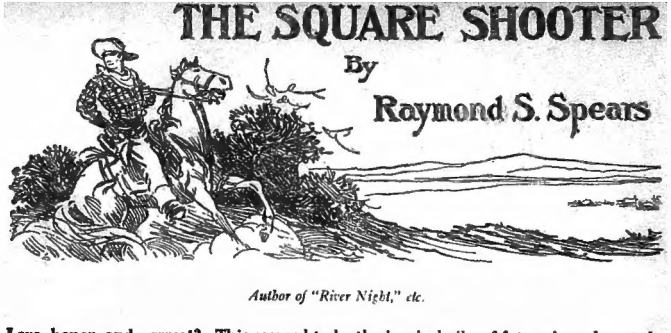
THE SQUARE SHOOTER



By

Raymond S. Spears

Author of "River Night," etc.

Love, honor, and—*arrest?* This seemed to be the ironical gibe of fate, when the smoking six-gun of the Square Shooter won the badge of under sheriff for Deputy Plack. For the roping expert, So Boss Parkey, was an outlaw "long-riding" in the mountains, and Deputy Plack knew where

CHAPTER I

A LOOP AT THE ARROW-EYE

THE squat, chunky figure of Mat Cobey rose from the calf, in the skin of whose throat he had just cut a wattle, a half inch strip of hide four inches long. He kicked the gasping little beast to make it run away from the fire, its flank still smoking where the iron had burned the brand of the Arrow-Eye ranch. Cobey was foreman, uglier than usual after a long roundup day down the gulches of the range on the south side of Dry Valley.

"Bring another one!" he yelped. "Whatcha doin'? *Snatch* 'im!"

Clearly nervous as he glanced toward the foreman, a slim cowboy dragged by a rope noose high on its forelegs, a black calf with an odd, reddish tinge. Just a boy, this rider, bent by a long day's work on top of weeks, months of too heavy toil, set his narrow jaws determinedly; he was peaked and his bloodshot eyes showed the overwhelming strain of relentless toil.

Out toward the setting sun in that dusty level, hardly visible in the horizontal glare of the day's end, two men were holding nearly a hundred cows, some of which were already licking the wounds of their manhandled offspring. And the two riders were swinging their ropes to whip back angry "she stuff." One of these men, long armed, with legs dangling comfortably, conversed in a low, drawling tone to his bony and powerful horse, which turned, checked at a word, and wriggled its ears.

Dusty, tired and worn by long days of work, no one could be wholly good natured. Everything depended on how a man took it, whether he could stand up under that terrific, constant strain of exertion. And at this moment, the mother of the reddish black calf which had been snared and was bawling at the top of its voice, made a feint which was as treacherous as it was effective. Turning short on her hind legs and leaving both herders heading the wrong way, she made a cat dash behind the lank cowman and came thundering across the open space, as fast as a wolf and infinitely more dangerous.

The cow was tall with a hump over her shoulders. She was blackish, with silvery hairs. Her body was deep beef, powerful, and she was armed with short, black, down curving horns. Her eyes were as red as rubies. Her tail plume tossed straight in the air, and her head was low; she was as deadly an antagonist as the cattle country affords, a maddened East India Brahma halfbreed dashing to the rescue of her bawling first calf! What a Brahma was doing so far from the salt grass marshes of the Texas coast was something of a mystery, but there she was on her way to make a kill. Her chosen victim was a toil worn boy—who handled a good rope, or he wouldn't have been snatching calves for Mat Cobey.

The angry mother was so swift that she was all clear on her way before her cunning intentions appeared. She dashed tearing down the sunshine and was close to the boy who, busy with the calf, did not discover her till she emerged from under the shadow of her own tawny dust. Then his horse warned him. One twitch and he slacked his rope clear. The next instant, his horse pivoted and sprang from in front. Then the big cow stood over her baby, letting the world know she was there, ready to protect her own.

The voice of Mat Cobey rose in grating crescendo, a repeating volley of angry curses which he directed at the boy. "What'd you shake that calf loose for?" he yelled. "You misbegotten, yellow backed pretence of a rider! I've stood all I'm going to!"

Unnerved, the boy sat limp and helpless in his saddle. He was all in, his horse ridden till it stood with its legs spread like a wounded deer's. The frantic swing to escape the cow's charge had apparently exhausted the last vitality of both mount and rider.

The man brute was about to exercise his wrath on the helpless victim. He was that kind. Every cowman in the region knew Mat Cobey was just that scoundrelly mean. In bursts of temper and fits of insane anger he had killed three men, two of them in dance hall rows, and one alone in the mountains under circumstances never explained. Every hand looking on knew Cobey had been riding the boy for weeks, watching him like a cat.

The lank cowboy had come in to drive the Brahma mother back. The foreman, seeing the cow thus headed, started on foot for the boy who sat staring stupidly at him, showing fear in every line of his frail, limp dejection. The rider would of course protect the foreman from the ferocious cow; Mat Cobey with his big teeth clenched, and his lips lifted apart, passed the fire, crossed the open, and ignored the cow and her calf which now were flanked by the holder. But the cowboy circling his rope to sting the animal did not swerve back to his own holding task. Instead, he was looking over his shoulder at Cobey, whose big fist was drawn far back.

The foreman's blow started, but it never landed. On the instant, with a beautiful backhand snap of his arm, the rider twitched his rope whip into a cast noose which leafed down over the foreman's head. The line came taut; the cowboy uttered an ejaculation as his rope twanked between saddle horn and the man's neck. Cobey's heels jerked forward as a loud crack startled the desert silence. The foreman never again would abuse anyone. His neck was broken as though he had plunged from a gallows drop!

"My Gawd!" the cowboy cried, untangling the dallies as he turned sharply back. "I didn't mean to do *that!*"

The others said not a word. Every listener's first thought was the man had lied, yet not one but was glad the thing had been done. All knew what it meant; and one said, as though to himself, "You got to ride, now!"

"I expect!" the cowboy nodded. "Well, s'long, boys!"

Thus instantly accepting the situation, the big fellow shook his noose from the dead man, glancing rather sharply at two of the crew as he coiled his rope. They were Cobey's top hands, who had been long at the ranch. Both stared, with chisel chins dropped, their eyes fixed in amazement. The killer leaned forward, his horse heading toward the ranch buildings on a knoll in the mouth of a creek valley toward the east.

A few minutes later the rest of the crew saw him emerge from the dormitory carrying his bag, and with a fresh horse from the corral, head into the range, driving his own string of horses up the rippling stream, following the trail into the mountains—an outlaw.

All the while the involuntary cause of the tragedy, the boy, sat on his horse breathing heavily, both arms dangling. Then another of the cowmen rode alongside him, to lead the tired horse toward the ranch-house, which was a quarter of a mile distant. Two others hustled the Brahma stray and her calf impatiently out of the way; the body of the dead man was rolled in his own saddle blanket and carried awkwardly by four riders toward the house. They eased it on the front balcony, shook off some of the day's dust from their clothes, and washed. Then all went in to eat.

The cook ran out to see what had happened, his gait a wabbling limp, the result of ill set bones sundered when a horse had sunfished and fallen over backward on him. He gave one long,

sharp look at the face upturned in the blanket, snarled at the corpse and abruptly returned to his job.

"Hi-i!" he presently summoned his "patients," and fed them double plenty of beef, canned corn, rafts of hotbread, and a cake three feet long by two wide, the sweetest sponge served between the Spanish Trail and Found Hell Playa. At least so the boys, luxuriously helping themselves twice over, all declared.

The weakened boy elbowed to the head of the table where Coby always sat, drank coffee in black gulps. He ate, choking now and then. Not one word was passed about the catastrophe of the day. A genuine feeling of ease and expansiveness pervaded the mess hall. The crew hardly had realized the intense anxiety, the strain of their lives on the Arrow-Eye ranch, till its menace was removed.

The boys smoked; they talked about dancing and drinking; and they sauntered presently into the parlor of the neat bungalow, started up the talking machine—an instrument which had remained disused for months because Coby had hated the pleasure men took in music. They played the instrument for hours, repeating some of the records over and over again when the refrains struck their fancy. Despite their weariness, they all sat up, except the boy.

He was lying on the leather covered lounge under the window, and fast asleep. This lounge was for the stockholders. Even the foreman had seldom reclined on it. The cook, his day's work done and the morning messes set ready for business at dawn, came shuffling in. His gaze fell on the huddled up figure of the youth. For a minute he glared at the frail figure, then rustled a woolen blanket which he spread over the trembling, quivering lad. He turned to sweep the others with his baleful gaze, but no one challenged his feeling of rough tenderness.

All sat around, whittling, studying the floor, now and then looking across the room at the telephone against the wall beside the desk, looming more and more ominously in the light of the big, round wicked kerosene lamp. No one made a move toward it, but all uneasily regarded that link with the rest of the world. No one went to it, no one spoke of it; but when at last no one fed the talking machine with new records, they heard the cook beginning to talk unconsciously to himself, expressing the indubitable opinion that he was thrice, and even multitudinously damned, anyhow, if he had any business telephoning. He claimed he was tongue tied, deaf and hadn't any use for the contraption, no matter what happened.

The others, listening, nodded their approval. They heard outside the wailing voices of coyotes and the more dreadful insistence of an owl. They began at last to whisper and interchange ideas. They started up suddenly, as by a common impulse. They crowded across the room, carrying the boy from the lounge with them through the doorway to the balcony. Without hesitation they gathered up the blanket and lugged in the victim of the noose, dropping the remains of Cobey on the lounge, covering them with the blanket out of which the boy had rolled.

The cook protested hotly that this was mighty disaccommodating to him, in view of the fact that his own bed was in the same building.

"Now of course, boys, it goes ag'in the grain, this business," one of the punchers at last remarked, "but seein' things is as they is, suppose we let this blamed, squallin' cook sleep with the men in the dormitory tonight, eh?"

Arguing the matter, enough objected to relieve the tension of a unanimous opinion. Then they lifted the boy who had gone to sleep again, carrying his shuddering and twitching form over to the bunkhouse. And soon the cook and the boy were talking in a strange dialogue in their sleep, the broken rider declaring his prowess as in the days of his great abilities, before the red horse crashed his nerves, and the boy crying out that he was strong, that he could stand it, and that he would die before he would quit.

NONE awakened early in the morning. Breakfast was as late as on a Sunday in winter, or during a blizzard. All roused as from evil dreams into more desolate realities. The boy emerged into consciousness, blinking and looking around as if puzzled by the dolorousness of his mates. He went to the main cabin to eat, and sauntered into the living room. Stopping short to stare at the figure on the couch he cried out, "Why, how come

it Mat Cobey—how come he got his?"

"He jes' busted his neck," one replied casually. "My Gawd, but it was an awful bull neck, at that!"

"Probably you better tell 'em." One of the crew jerked his thumb at the telephone. "One long ring, an' everybody'll listen in."

"This is the Arrow-Eye Ranch," the boy obeyed. "Mat Cobey's done broke his neck. Say, yo', Central! Won't yo' kindly notify the sheriff?"

"Yes, indeed!" a clear voice replied. "Who's speaking, please?"

"Jimmy Duggal."

"That you, Jimmy? I'll tell the sheriff right away!"

Then all hands sat around for perhaps the longest half hour any of them had ever experienced. Just when one of them thought to start the phonograph, the telephone bell rang, and Jimmy, under the gestures of his mates, went to listen.

"This the Arrow-Eye?" a heavy voice demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"Wha's this I hear 'bout Mat Cobey bein' killed up?"

"He—why—I don't know. His neck's broke!"

"Neck broke! How come? Hoss pitch 'im?"

"How come he broke his neck, boys? Fall off'n his hoss?" Jimmy turned, pleading.

"He ketched his neck into a rope an' was goin' the wrong way," a voice explained.

"He tangled hisse'f into a rope," Jimmy relayed the information, "an' he was snatched——"

"What!" the voice bellowed. "Tellin' me Mat looped hisse'f! Who are you, anyhow?"

"Jimmy Duggal!"

"Oh, hell; I want to talk to a man!"

"Yes, sir!" Jimmy assented with relief, turning to say, "It's the sheriff, an' he wants to talk to a man."

"Hurry up!" came over the wire, and Jimmy indicated the man in the corner. This was a slim, sturdy red haired, green eyed rider.

"This yo', Sheriff? This is Pat Divver. Whatcha want?"

"What do I want—my Gawd! What's happened there—Mat Cobey dead?"

"Yes, sir, Sheriff, I expaict he is!"

"Well, what happened? Do I need the coroner?"

"No, sir, not to kill him you don't, Sheriff."

"What—not to kill him? What's the matter, anyhow? Where's Mat?"

"He's daid, Sheriff; I know he's daid. Commencing last night he ain't wriggled. We watched him an' he ain't moved."

"What happened? Who killed him?"

"He tangled hisself in a backlash, Sheriff, an' he was going the wrong way instead of easin' up, an' he broke his neck."

"Fell out his saddle?"

"No, sir! He was brandin', and a damn' ugly Brahma cow——"

"Brahma? What the——"

"Yes, sir! Stray in these parts, ugly as hell, Sheriff! An' she confused us all up, an' Mat he ketched into a loop an' broke his neck!"

"Oh, well! That's a damn' likely story, ain't it? I'm coming, all right."

"Yes, sir! You'll be welcome——"

A sharp click closed the conversation. But before the sheriff arrived, another call came in. "This is Hank Payton," a voice boomed. "President of the Arrow-Eye Ranch Company. What's this about Mat Cobey being dead?"

"He broke his neck, sir," Pat explained soothingly.

"I know about that; but how the hell'd he break his neck?"

"He was goin' one way an' the rope the other, Mr. Payton."

"Eh— How's that?"

"You see, they was a lot of she stuff, an' a Brahma cow she started——"

"Brahma cow? What's a Brahma doin' in the Arrow-Eye country?"

"That's what we was all wondering, Mr. Payton."

"Well, what happened?"

"Well, she started to get her calf, an' she got it, too. So Mat he started, an' one of the riders was goin' the other way, an' a rope drawed upon Mat under the chin, an' doggone! He never eased up, an' that was all."

"Well, I'm comin' right out!"

"Yes, sir. Yo' can't get in too quick for us," Pat assured him.

Sheriff Hotchkiss, Prosecuting Attorney Growe, Coroner Creepet, and Deputy Sheriff Dales came out, all on a mileage basis—forty miles out and forty in. They were only a few minutes ahead of the big fellow, Payton, who

was chief owner of the cattle company. They found Mat Cobey certainly dead. They found seven cowboys, and the cook, glad to have them come but uneasy just the same.

"Where's the other man?" Payton demanded. "There were eight riders!"

The cowboys looked at one another. No one made any answer. The officials studied their expressions one after the other. They read something electric in the reticence. They had two tangible facts; that Mat Cobey was dead, his neck unlinked; and that one rider was absent.

Payton went to the time book, and studied it a few minutes. "Pat Diver!" he called.

"Yessir!"

"Jim Duggal?"

"Yessir!"

"Hank Spall!"

"Me, yes!"

"Parkey?"

No answer. Payton looked around at the embarrassed cowboys. They studied the floor, rolled cigarettes, and two began to whittle the furniture. "Who's Parkey? Where's he at?" Sheriff Hotchkiss demanded. "You, Pat. Where's he—Parkey?"

"I don't know Parkey."

"Um-m—he's the one Mat called 'So Boss'?"

"Where's So Boss?" Hotchkiss demanded angrily.

"I ain't seen him today, Sheriff." Pat shook his head.

The newcomers grew stern. These men were surely holding out. Then the men were taken, one at a time, for questioning. There were seven men and the cook. Some wouldn't talk. The cook and Duggal couldn't tell anything. But presently, under the pressure, the authorities learned that Mat Cobey had been entangled in the noose of So Boss Parkey.

"That wasn't any accident, either!" Payton declared, angrily. "Who's he, anyhow?"

"So Boss?" the sheriff repeated. "I've seen that scoundrel. He was over to Racklack Court a while back—tall, gangling feller—and he was working for—who the devil was he working for? Hey, you! Where'd So Boss come from?"

"Missouri, I reckon, Sheriff," Pat replied.

"Oh, hell!" the sheriff swore, but added, " remember, he was with Box-S over on the Juniper Brakes."

Over the wire he confirmed his memory. So Boss Parkey had worked for Capoll, of the Juniper Brakes.

"Let me talk to Capoll," Payton said, and growled into the receiver, "This you, Capoll? This is Payton. So Boss Parkey killed Mat Cobey, our foreman here at the Arrow-Eye ranch. Broke his neck. We don't know all that happened, but the cowboy did it. Course, we can't allow that. Watch out, will you? Make sure he don't come through your way. Get him, if he does. Keep your eyes open!"

Then Payton, standing at the telephone, called up five other ranches in various directions from Arrow-Eye, and in substance told his fellow ranchers to get that cowboy—and in that country when one goes to get a man, it means take him *dead!* Sheriff Hotchkiss confirmed the order with a formal reward notice which was telephoned to all the leading ranches and to several cow and mine towns.

"Five hundred dollars, dead or alive!" Hotchkiss declared. "Guaranteed by the Arrow-Eye Brand!"

The cowboys sat listening with dumb regret to the procedure. They had been unable to avert this very thing. For killing a man who needed it, to protect a helpless, worn out boy, death would be the penalty—when and if they caught So Boss Parkey.

CHAPTER II

THE HEAD TEACHER OF RACKLACK

LENA PLACK taught school in Racklack. She was slender, blue eyed and Eastern. The West had summoned her, irresistibly. Accordingly, she was now a part of the West, the superintendent of the Racklack County school system, with her office in a corner of the great brick building on the high knoll overlooking the Silver Breaks in the northeast, the Waning Glories toward the northwest, the thread of highway that led eastward over the rolling plateau of Nevada through Dry Valley toward Great Salt Lake Basin, some hundreds of miles distant.

At twenty-seven years, Lena stood untouched by the inclemencies of life.

Much satisfaction had come to her. After five years she was unabated in her love of this great Racklack country, and not one day had passed on which she felt any least shade of disappointment or regret.

A number of people had expressed surprise that Lena was still a spinster. John Payton, son of Henry Payton, leading banker, capitalist and cattleman, and cashier by favor of the Racklack bank, had essayed to court the young teacher. To his astonishment he found this teacher as nearly indifferent as possible to his anxious moods. She danced with him casually anywhere from Eureka to Reno, when the crowd went to those or nearer parts. At the same time, John had no monopoly as regarded her company. The first who came carried her to the "doings," and she was apt to go with Deputy Sheriff Dales, or the cowboy So Boss Parkey.

She once had let So Boss Parkey know that she wished she could shoot straight; and immediately he squandered six months' wages on firearms for her. Now she had two pearl handled, blue barreled .32 caliber revolvers with fast draw holsters which came from Cheyenne. And she had shot these weapons, right and left, a thousand times each. Also, she had practiced with a .22 caliber automatic rifle till she could show astonishing marksmanship on jackrabbits, coyotes and other pestiferous range critters. Her saddle boot, specially embossed, carried a .33 caliber rifle which shot a shell nearly five inches long, and would do damage half a mile or so away on any animal from grizzly and lobo to wild burro or mountain deer.

Her efforts to repay the cowboy had been futile, in a way. At the same time she had given this lanky stranger out of the largesse of her own library. Riding with him occasionally, she had surprised or beguiled him into the use of words unusual on the lips of cowboys.

With unassumed gladness, John Payton brought Lena Plack the news that So Boss was a badly wanted fugitive. "They've offered five hundred reward for him!" John grinned, alertly. "Thought I'd better let you know; that's a lot of money."

"Yes, indeed," she assented, "but what did that cowboy do?"

"Murder! He killed Mat Cobey, dad's manager at the Arrow-Eye ranch."

"Killed him? Did Mat need it?" she inquired.

"*What!* You don't mean you think it could ever be all right for a cowboy to kill a ranch superintendent, do you?"

"Well, Mat has done some killing himself," she mused. "Of course, I don't know what happened. What did?"

"Why, they were branding calves, and had a row. So Boss tangled Mat in his rope, and broke his neck."

"Oh!" Lena caught her breath.

"And if he shows up, you could cash him in for five hundred!" John grinned. "That's a lot of money!"

"I know—and that's all they think it's worth to catch him?"

"Oh, my, no! That's just the start, probably. The sheriff offers that. Dad guarantees it—I mean, the Arrow-Eye company. Then there'll be the cattle rangers, who'll sure offer some. I shouldn't be surprised if he was worth fifteen hundred or so, before they get through with it!"

"It'd be more thrifty, don't you think, to wait till we can get all that's coming, before we catch him?" she inquired, gently.

"Why, that's so. You're right! If you need any help——"

"Oh, no. When I catch him, I'll prefer to go it straight and alone on the reward," she rebuffed him. "I shouldn't care to split it even two ways."

Payton instantly saw the point. She was from New England stock, so naturally she would be a bit close in money matters. Money was money with him, the same as with anyone else. At the same time, he wasn't averse to making a good friend by throwing something her way, when he might not perhaps be able to take advantage of the chance himself.

She assured Payton she didn't care to go riding that afternoon, after school. She was greatly obliged, however, for the information which he had imparted to her.

THE killing of Mat Cobey made a sensation. Here the ablest, the most profitable superintendent of the Arrow-Eye ranch had been hanged on a lariat to the pommel of a cowboy's saddle, his neck broken as by a gallows fall. A thing like that simply couldn't be tolerated.

The examination of the cowboys who

witnessed the tragedy soon revealed the truth. Pat Divver and Jim Duggal were brought in to insure the State having witnesses. The boy was plainly in such condition as not to be much missed on the ranch; and Pat had agreed to tell the grand jury and everybody all he knew, if they'd board him at the jail a while. Jimmy, still stunned, was unable to talk much. Accordingly it had been deemed advisable to get him to believe whatever would be most convenient to have him tell, when the grand jury should sit in October. The two cowboys, though supposed to be detained in the jail, nevertheless were permitted to ramble around Racklack, as long as they didn't try to escape, and provided they didn't wake the jailer up too late at night for admittance to their cages. As Jailer Morvick spent his evenings playing poker, this didn't mean going to bed any too early.

Lena met Jimmy on the sidewalk near the post office the second day after his arrival in town.

"Hello, Jimmy," she said. "Why don't you come to school now, and finish your education? You'll have two or three months of schooling, anyhow, and perhaps all winter. You used to want to learn, you know."

"I've been working three years." He wearily wiped his forearm across his brow. "I've kinda forgot all you did teach me."

"Oh, no you haven't!" she laughed. "My pupils don't forget what I teach them; no, indeed!"

"Course, I'd like to," the boy admitted.

The superintendent froze to the boy. She started him where he had left off, and sat beside him, helping him where the sledding was hard. She took him in her roadster to tutor him. She soothed and calmed his broken nerves; and she inveigled from him more than he realized he knew. The terrific shock when he was caught in his weariness between the Brahma mother cow and the foreman's anger, when he shook loose the roped calf, had built in his mind a barrier he could not cross voluntarily. But Lena Plack cut away that barrier. She learned the truth of the killing of Mat Cobey.

"Mat were comin' to pound me!" the boy whimpered. "He pulled back his big fist to hit me. I knowed it'd ram me in the stomach, and weakly like I was, I seen I'd die. Then come So Boss with his rope, the purtiest throw yo' eveh seen, Miss Plack! Law me! Jes' one of them Texas mesquite nooses, not fifteen inches acrost. Hit come back handed, flipped thirty foot, I bet. An' jest when Mat let go his fist, that rope set ag'in his throat, his face yanked backward, his heels come up higher'n my haid—an' that scoundrel won't never kill nobody else, not me, not any sickly, weakly man. He never killed a well strong man in his life; never fought a healthy man. Always he despised us no-'counts——"

"You're not no-'count!" she retorted, sharply. "I tell you, you've a *mind;* and you've better, bigger brains than Mat Cobey ever had! I just want you to remember that; and when it comes to the grand jury, you tell the boys what you've told me, will you? Don't tell them or anybody else, before then. Just keep still. Let 'em fill you with any story they want you to tell, but don't you say aye, yes or no. Don't sign any paper, either."

"I won't," the boy sighed. "I'll do just like you say."

THE editor of the *Racklack Puncher* was Rip Van Wayne, an old reporter who had worked in New York, Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco. His restlessness had brought him to the Nevada plateaus and to a better living than he had ever enjoyed before, good money and a country in keeping with his wandering search for adventures. To him went Lena Plack.

"Say, Rip!" she laughed. "I'm going over into the Waning Glories for the week end. I'll camp at the old Sweetwater springs, where they built that concrete dam, to make a waterhole. If you'll run that as a news item, it'll explain why I'm not attending the card party at Reno Saturday night, you know."

"Oh-h, sure! All right. If I can ever help you——"

"Thanks, a thousand times!"

The item appeared:

Supt. Lena Plack is going into the Waning Glory Range on Friday after school, to gather geological and botanical specimens. She plans to be gone over the week end, cutting her usual social en-

gagements. She will camp at the Sweetwater Pools.

The newspaper was put into the mails on Tuesday afternoon, and by Friday it had been read in four counties. On that afternoon, Lena Plack left the county court with her camping outfit lashed to the running boards of her Studander, her two rifles in their frames, and her beautiful revolvers obviously dangling in holsters from her belt.

More than one pair of eyes watched the cloud of her alkali dust as the car rolled in the two ruts of the trail which led to the Snake Brand and other ranches toward the north. The Waning Glories, true to their name, were beautiful in the colorful sunset on that day, and even when the dust was visible some forty miles distant, there were those who watched it roll up in the tawny bulging of wind whipped cloud.

The trail to the artificial waterhole at the Sweetwater springs was rough and slow. The distance was nearly eighty miles, fifteen west from the main trail. Five hours had elapsed when the young woman stopped rather breathlessly at the camp ground below the dam.

Here she was surprised to find a stack of juniper cedar chunks and kindlings, a thick bed of cedar boughs and the haunch of a deer which had been killed within a few hours. The headlights and her hand flash disclosed no evidence that anyone had camped there. Her surprise gave way to a smile of satisfaction.

Pitching her leanto tent, she supped lightly, and slept well that night. When at sunrise she was frying a venison steak over the fire she heard a hail, and turned to see some thirty yards distant So Boss Parkey, hat in hands while his horse grazed down the runlet of the waste from the pond.

"Why, how are you!" she greeted him, as though she had not known he was there. She went to shake his hand, and they breakfasted together.

"I didn't know if you'd want to say howdy," he declared frankly.

"Why do you suppose I had Rip print the item that I was coming here?" she demanded. "I thought I owed it to you to be friendly when perhaps you might like to know somebody understood how you saved Jimmy Duggal from a merciless old brute!"

"You—" So Boss had not expected any such greeting as that. He had feared a thousand things which might happen.

"The big fellows are all against you," she continued. "You're up against it. Probably you haven't a ghost of a show of coming clear. Many a man would shoot you on sight, you know, to get the reward and especially to curry favor with the owners who demand utter subservience to their managers. I was in hopes you had left the country. At the same time, I wanted to see you before you went."

"I'm not going," he declared.

"You know what that means?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I know," he nodded, morosely. "I'll be hunted like a dog; they'll bushwhack me if they can; they'll try to buy my friends; they'll try and hang me legally if they catch me, or lynch me if they must. But I've been around a lot. I like this country best. Course, I could go down to the border, or I could go over into southern Colorado. But I didn't come——"

"You didn't run away West to escape troubles and griefs, danger and difficulties?" she inquired.

"Just so!" he admitted. "I've been a good rider for ten years, so prob'ly I'll be a—um-m——"

"Bad man for a change?" she inquired.

He nodded.

"If I asked you to go, would you?" She looked at him.

"If you'd go—" he replied, checking himself a trifle too late.

"Suppose I won't?"

"I'll stay," he said simply.

ALL this was not exactly the conventional thing for a school teacher, much less the superintendent of a county school system, to do. At the same time, pretty Lena Plack knew exactly what she was about. She felt she could do no less; and when toward sunset they were back at the Springs, she saw the fugitive from justice swing up on his saddle horse to ride away, leaving Prank, the other horse, hobbled above the waterhole in an acre of grass, she was well pleased with herself.

"I reckon I better get over the range," Parkey said. "I likely'll see you in the morning."

"Fine!" she smiled.

Thus she sat by her fire of cedar chunks, hands clasped across her shins, listening to the owls and coyotes. Then, presently, she heard another sound. She cupped her hand over her ear, listening the more keenly. She could not be mistaken; another automobile was coming up the trail to this camp ground! She soon saw the flashing of the springing headlights, and then the car itself appeared.

From behind the glare appeared a knickerbockered figure, which she recognized only too quickly.

"You see," the newcomer grinned as he approached, "when I read where you were camping over the week end, I knew what you meant. Honest, I was tickled to death to cut Reno tonight, and come. If I hadn't had to be in the bank this morning, I'd come last night. I couldn't get off, though."

"I think, John Payton, you assume a whole lot from a very slight suggestion," she said quietly.

"Sure!" he chuckled. "I can take a hint, you bet."

"Well, suppose you take one now," she suggested icily. "Suppose you turn that car around and follow the headlights down the grade!"

"What!" he started, in some surprise, and then laughed. "I guess not; this is Government land; that's free water; anyone can camp here that wants to. And, besides, you're only fooling!"

She started back toward her tent from his sudden rush. She tripped and fell, and the visitor seized her. "Why, you aren't afraid of me!" he laughed. "Course you aren't!"

Chapter III

A cowboy's nickname

IN TRUTH, So Boss Parkey did not object greatly to being a fugitive from justice, or rather what would pass in a pinch for justice on the wild, high plateaus. Having killed a man, without intending quite that, he hardly excused himself. When, however, Wake Up Dawson gave him a job as outrider under an assumed name, and brought out the newspaper for him to read how everybody was hunting for him, the statement that Lena Plack was coming out to the Sweetwater Springs had startled him, giving him pause. He wondered if he knew more about women than he had surmised. He had taught the school teacher some things; she had given him books to read; they had been right friendly. He now remembered little things about her, trifles and tiny favors.

Accordingly he rode to greet her in that camp she had chosen. He just wanted to know what her feelings were toward him, if she would remain friendly when he was a fugitive from the law. Sunrise was an appropriate hour to arrive. Sunset the proper time to leave. Only that day had given him a new and different feeling, an emotion which might mean merely his gratitude to find her still loyal, in spite of knowing the truth of this notorious killing.

Instead of going up the canyon over the range, he had gone down the valley. Sunset had fallen on the wide grazing ground. His eyes swept the land. And then So Boss saw coming into this waterhole trail fork a dust which meant an automobile. Naturally, he removed himself from the landscape, and from a cluster of juniper cedars he watched the automobile go by in the dark. He sighed at the approach. He knew that blatant red car. How often John Payton had come to claim some girl the popular cowboy was amusing!

"Now he's come visiting her." So Boss shrugged his shoulders with an uncomfortable feeling.

He watched the car's red tail light jumping along the rough canyon trail. He looked northward, whither he had intended to ride away for the night. Then he mounted his horse to follow the car back up toward the springs, dismounting well out of hearing to go on afoot to watch whatever might ensue—making sure of just one thing. If Payton was welcome, all right. That would be Lena Plack's personal affair, one which would compel the cowboy to revise his own ideas a bit.

Only the fellow *wasn't* welcome! The first angry greeting of the school superintendent showed that. Her bearing was unmistakably indignant. Payton's own words were inaudible in their low tone, but his actions were plain enough. The cowboy looked back toward his horse, puckering his lips to whistle the animal up, but changed his mind on the instant. Instead, he ran across to the animal, his footsteps silent in the dry

wash sand, and caught his rope from his saddle.

John Payton didn't know what hit him. A sudden clench vised his throat as he held the girl by both elbows, laughing at her struggles. He saw strange colors, and then the red lights flared black out of his eyes. And So Boss would have held the noose drawn up tight, had not Lena Plack discerned by the light of her fire what protection had rescued her.

"Don't!" she cried. "You mustn't kill him!"

"Well, just as you say!" the cowboy replied quietly, releasing the red lined, white throat of the fellow, as he turned to her. "And I want to apologize to you for coming back. I wasn't spying on you, Lena. I don't claim any affair of yours to be my business. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. If he'd been welcome, of course, I'd gone away, *pronto*."

"Having come so opportunely, So Boss, you *apologise?*" She stared at him, "I—really—and if he'd been welcome would you have come back sometime to see me?"

"I expect," he nodded, gravely. "And —well, probably I ought to apologize for that, for admitting I might have!"

She laughed. Men all are funny, of course, and some more amusing than others. "Is—is his neck broken, do you think?" she asked in sudden alarm, as she noticed the limpness of Payton, his eyes partly open, bulging.

"He's just some suffocated is all," the cowboy reassured her. "I just aimed to gentle him. I'd better take him down the line."

"Thank you!" she smiled. "But if he comes to, you mustn't let him see you."

She looked in Payton's car for a blindfold, and found a silk scarf in a door pocket. So Boss bound this around Payton's eyes, lifted the fellow into the car and headed it down the canyon wagon trail into the wide open valley desert. Behind him came Lena Plack in her car, following.

A mile distant, Parkey stopped, going back to consult with Lena. They were confronted by a difficult problem. "I've tied him," Parkey said, "and he don't know what happened to him. I'm wearing gloves, so there won't be any finger prints. I'll take him in to the sheriff, and go on the stand as witness, if you say so."

"But then they'd have *you!*" she exclaimed.

"What of it? He needs prison. What he did, you know, doesn't go in this country."

She shook her head. The law would but add outrage to villainy.

"Suppose I run him on down to the valley bottom—the road's rutted after ten miles or so, and would hold the wheels—then start him in low gear?"

"That would take him far from here," she admitted, doubtfully.

OUT in the sage, where wheel ruts marked the trail to Racklack, Parkey set Payton's gears in low. Lena looked at the gas tank gauge, and saw that the car would run perhaps twenty miles at that rate of fuel consumption. There were no washes, no precipices into which the car could tumble. But as Parkey also looked things over, to insure the bearing of the scoundrel away and far across the country, she cut the white line that bound the still unconscious victim's wrists.

"All ready?" Parkey inquired, and let the clutch in. He adjusted the gas lever, and swung out of the car as it rolled. He had becketed the wheel by two cords. The machine rolled away, all dark, at about six miles an hour.

The cowboy chuckled. "He'll have some fun shaking his hands loose of those knots," Parkey told the girl, who came to his side. She said nothing, but she was glad she had cut the thongs. At best, Payton had not been gently handled.

"Please drive me back," she asked, and Parkey took the wheel of her car still with no headlights burning, for the gleam would have carried to the Silver Breaks, to the Snake Brand Ranch, to the eyes of any belated, herd riding cowboy in the basin.

Then stopping, Parkey carefully brushed out the wheel marks of the turn around, well enough to escape casual observation. The wind would drift the erasure with sand and dust.

"It'll probably stop in sight of the Snake Brand, don't you think?" she suggested, nervously. "Payton's car, I mean."

"Probably," he replied carelessly. "That don't worry me any."

They returned to the canyon, in the deep shadow of which they tarried a while before he rode away again, pretending he was going away off yonder, somewhere. She knew as well as he did, that he would roll up in his saddle blanket within calling distance beside the roadway in the canyon narrows. And she knew that he would return in the morning, making some perfectly acceptable excuse for arriving so early.

Sure enough, as the first streaks of dawn illuminated the peaks of the Silver Breaks, which were visible through the notch of the valley, painting the outlines of the purple mountains in golden silhouettes against the rose and blue of the skies, she heard the striking of his horse's hooves against the stones.

And when sunrise came over the mountains into the canyon, they sat down to a breakfast of broiled venison and delicacies from her own hamper. The morning passing swiftly brought midday only too soon. She could not tarry long. Many beautiful plants flowered along the overfall from the waterhole, in the wash down the canyon. They two gathered specimens of these, and put them into her car. She pinned to his breast pocket a gay autumnal posie, and he tucked another under the comb that held her bobbed hair. They parted as good friends should, sure of meeting again. When she looked back, through her powerful binoculars, she saw him standing by his horse at the mouth of the canyon.

Lena assured Mrs. Clevelax, her boarding-house hostess that she had had a perfectly delightful time. She read a while that evening, but went to sleep so often that she retired early for the night. And in the morning, she sauntered to the school, strolling along with smiles to all eager recipients. Another week had begun.

Toward noon, Henry Payton in his eight cylinder two ton roadster dashed swirling up the high school drive, coming to the superintendent's office. "Ah, Miss Plack!" he greeted her with suavity tempered by anxiety only partly concealed, and embarrassment much restrained. "Do you happen to know what has become of John? He went away on Saturday and hasn't returned."

"Why, didn't he go to Reno?" she inquired.

"Why—eh—they thought—somebody said around—you didn't go to Reno, did you, to the dance?"

"No; I went to the Waning Glories, at Sweetwater Springs gathering some autumnal blossoms. Why?"

"Well—er—you see—" Payton felt uneasily for his handkerchief. "He didn't show up over there, then?"

"Not if anyone would know it, he didn't, Mr. Payton," she declared tartly. "What would he be doing there?"

Payton colored unhappily. He had this much grace. He realized that his inquiry was a real insult, though he seldom worried about such breaks.

"He's just a kid, you know," he hedged. "I thought perhaps—you see, he said he was going to the Waning Glories, too. He didn't mean anything."

"Possibly it is just as well he didn't mean anything, Mr. Payton," Lena commented. "Indeed, I should rather think it is!"

THE big roadster scorched, skidding down the school ground grade around the curve into town. The young woman bit her lips, vexed and troubled She had not seen John Payton's car on the way in, and realized that somewhere along the way it must have jumped out of the ruts and wandered off across the sage and playa. In that case, anything might have happened, might now be happening, in fact.

Going to the cupola on the high school building, she turned her 12-power binoculars to study the view beyond the limits of Racklack over the valley toward the northwest.

A scuffle of dust, a mere puff, caught her attention toward the mountains in the sag of the saucer basin. Leveling her glasses quickly, she discerned a fleck of agitation out where the land was lowest and barest, the alkali a breadth of level dry lake unfretted by hummocks or sage. A flicker as of a mirage, and quite distinctly she saw a tiny distortion with the figure of a human, like a penny porcelain doll, struggling and rising from the ground, then stumbling and swaying toward Racklack, only to fall in another flurry of dust.

She recognized the symptoms. She took the bearings. She made sure the lost and weakened man was right in line with Nipple Top Butte. With this fact established she immediately called up the

ity marshal by phone, speaking urgently.

"Joe!" she cried. "There's a man in trouble, staggering this way from Nipple Top, right in line with the old well derrick and the high school cupola! He stands and stumbles, walking, then falling down again!"

Chapter IV

A TALE UNTOLD

AWAKENING as from an evil dream, tormented by nightmare helplessness, John Payton emerged from unconsciousness into realities. He could not think what was happening, for he was jouncing and reeling along, carried by what seemed to be immeasurable forces. Thrown from side to side, cramped in a space that thumped and held him, he was suddenly projected forth and fell, he could not tell how far, to a dark and dismal earth.

Shaking himself, sitting up, staring about, he recognized the sky and its stars. He saw an automobile looming darkly as it reeled along on its way, the right side door open. He watched it, fascinated as it went rolling into the increasing gloom of distance.

Dawn was coming, just enough to enable him to see the car go on its way. He was sore. His throat seemed as large around as a nail keg. When he put his hands against it, the skin burned, stinging with fiery smart. What had happened? He was able to recall events only meagerly and slowly. He was quite unable to figure out where he was. How had he come to this inexplicable place?

Only too quickly his recollection made plain to him the course of his project. He had learned that Lena Plack was going over to the Waning Glories gathering botanical specimens. The opportunity had seemed an inviting one. He had regarded it, even, as a chance made especially for him. Why shouldn't he, too, go to the Sweetwater Spring Canyon? Indeed, wasn't this expected of him?

The delights of anticipation had accompanied him from Racklack to the pretty camp ground. He could remember many details of the journey. He had passed the Snake Brand ranch outfit in the evening. He had come to the turnout for the Sweetwater canyon. He had rolled up to the camp and with pleasant emotions crossed to greet Lena Plack at her campfire.

Of his reception he had only too distinct a memory. She was exactly the reverse from his expectations. Her anger had nettled him. The idea of her not being glad to see him—who did she think he was, anyhow? And did she think he'd taken all the trouble to come out there to be treated that way, with indignation?

Plainly he could visualize the sequence of events as he approached her. He had seized her. The fragrance of her had been maddening. Even now, the memory of it was warm on his cheeks. She had been frightened, angry, and struggled against his strength. The next moment horror had seized him. His own body seemed to go dead. His head had seemed bursting, as with an explosion, and his throat had been seized, constricted, reduced to the size of a match stick with pangs of strangulation, while blazing fires seared his brain and tortured his eyes as they lost their sight, his senses dying.

That had been evening. He had been unconscious a long time. He was sure this was morning. Instead, the increasing light was the rising of the moon over beyond the Silver Breaks. Night still prevailed. For all he knew, days, weeks, years might have elapsed. Weakness numbed his arms. With difficulty, he staggered to wavering knees. He stood up, shaking the faintness from his spirits.

He recognized the Waning Glories; Nipple Top, off to his right. The moon was over in another direction. He could discern the cluster of knobs down southward, with the sparkling of lights, as Racklack. He started in that direction. The distance was far. He was burning with thirst, already. He knew he was entering upon a struggle for life. He was weak and sore. Fear nagged his footsteps. He was aware he must keep his nerve, and head in the direction of the town. Literally shaking himself, he tried to clear the changing mists of his mind.

He would never know how far or how long he was on the way that night. The moon at times seemed laggard. Then again it seemed to have taken curious jumps across the sky. The stars changed their bearings, too, inexplicably. The town of Racklack alone remained

constant, as he struggled toward it.

Somewhere on the way he lost the moon entirely. The lights of Racklack vanished. In alarm he straightened up to stare about. Night had gone by, and this was daytime. Instead of lights he saw the tiny structures of the county seat, as revealed in the sunlight.

He discovered on one of his wrists two turns of stout cord, like tent line. It was knotted, causing him infinite trouble when he worked at the tight, involuted ends. Around his other wrist was a red double line, like a bracelet. He let the released rope fall as he scrambled on his way.

Weak and suffering, every effort grew steadily more difficult. He stumbled to his knees, rose and grimly pressed on again. He watched the city, sharply revealed by sunlight and shadow, forcing himself toward the destination. The pilot butte was gray and white against the cloudless, crystalline sky, and he could discern the schoolhouse standing forth on the abutting knoll. When the world began to spin around, his impulse to run had to be fought, for he knew it was thirst, and the avid glare of the sunshine driving him insane. A shadow flickered by, which drew his attention to the vultures circling overhead. With all his will power he braced himself. His eyes cleared and for a time he forced himself along his dreadful way.

The mirages would not be denied. The edges of his horizon tipped up. He slipped down this slope and scrambled along the brink of that decline. This was, of course, absurd, for he was in the midst of a vast playa, and there were no hills but only levels; and yet even Racklack itself began to climb to interminable heights, and he began to scale a terrific precipice in the effort to keep steadily on his way to it.

Then he saw monsters coming. They were horrible shapes. They looked to be a mile high, creatures with switching alligator tails and laughing devil's ears, horse heads and serpentine bodies that undulated and squirmed coming at him more or less sideways. The silence of the desert began to be broken by the music of singing buzzards, whose refrains were irresistible melodies. But oblivion blessed him at last.

Sure enough, Lena Plack's discovery of something out there on the playa had proved to be a man. With considerable curiosity she waited the return of the five horsemen who had ridden out to investigate. Late in the afternoon, after school hours, Marshal Joe Roswell came to her office.

"Howdy, Marshal," she greeted. "Long time I no see you."

"Yes, indeed," he grinned. "Not but what I'd like a reasonable excuse right frequently. That was a good tip you give me this morning. Old Hank Payton was r'aring around, looking for John, and, you know, that feller you spotted out toward Nipple Top was his boy, and all in! But for you, he'd prob'ly died, for the buzzards was circling over him, one on the ground near to him as across this room—waiting."

"I'm glad you arrived in time."

"And there's a funny thing we noiced, too," the marshal puzzled his brows. "We couldn't figure it out, nohow. He'd gone loony, all right. But around his neck and both wrists were rope marks. Under his ears was a big spot for the honda. You could see the braidings of the rawhide, like he'd been hung; and the twisted cord marks, too. Nobody could figure that out."

"Won't he tell what happened?" she asked.

"Tell? Why, he's all in, full of deliriums and miseries. He's out of his head, talking about his car running away, dancing, playing cards—and you."

"He talks about *me*, Marshal?" she asked, feigning astonishment.

"Why," the marshal shifted on his feet, stirring as he sat on the chair. "He says he loves you, wants to marry you, talks about eloping with you—and——"

"And *what?*" she demanded, as the uncomfortable man hesitated.

"He 'lowed to force you to marry him, it seems," the marshal continued, "but just when he thought he'd found you he went blooey."

"He thought he found *me*, Marshal?"

"He kind of whimpered and said it must have been a dream, for when he waked up he was away out nowhere, no road, no nothing but desert."

"Yes, I rather think it must have been a dream, Marshal," she shrugged. "I was over at the Sweetwater, in the Waning Glories, you know. Hank Payton insinuated this morning that John came over there to find me. What could have happened?"

"That's just what we are trying to

figure out," the marshal admitted. "You know how these fellers are that gets lost in the desert, sunstruck, thirsty, hungry and scared. They get to see and know a lot of things that ain' so. How come it you happened to see him out there, anyhow?"

"Now look here, Marshal, why don't you tell me what I say'll be used against me, and be done with it?" she demanded angrily.

"'Cause hit won't, Miss Plack; that's why I don't say it," he declared bluntly. "I'm yore friend. I just kinda wanted to prepare you, that's all, if anything should come up."

"Marshal, I love those mountains, the Waning Glories. I looked to see them this morning, wondering if I could see the Sweetwater Springs notch.

"Can you?"

"Just about. The big cliff just this side of there, up the Square Top mountain, is plain as can be."

"You know John went out that way, Saturday afternoon." The marshal returned to his text.

"He did?"

"Yes."

"Horseback?"

"No, automobile!"

"That's funny; I came in the road yesterday afternoon."

"Didn't see any sign of him?"

"No. I didn't notice. Course, there were automobile tracks, but I didn't pay any attention. Have you telephoned out to the ranches?"

"They saw a car go by at the Snake Brand, just after dark. He didn't get to the ranch beyond there. He was headed north, away from here."

"Well, then he must have got lost at the forks, or something like that. In those playas, you know, you have to watch closely which way is which."

"Darned if I know." Marshal Joe shook his head. "Coming on getting Mat Cobey killed up, old Payton sure is full of disturbance and curiosity. What gets everybody is that rope mark. Course, if somebody was mad at John, they might just give him a choking, by way of warning. I've heard he needed it, more or less."

"Well, mostly people get what they need, sooner or later," she said. "I'm certain, as you're a friend of mine, I don't need *him*. I'll tell you that."

"Course, I know he's no good," the marshal nodded. "At the same time, I thought I'd let you know the whole business," he commented. "With Mat Cobey lassoed, here comes John Payton with the same mark on him. Perhaps it don't mean anything. Perhaps it does. You know how everybody does patchwork, fitting pieces together. Payton called everybody's attention to them coincidences. He's r'aring. Seems he knows So Boss Parkey's been seen over on the west side of the Waning Glories, a party of Government topographical surveyors noticing him. I mean one of their mule packers. Well, I'll be moseying. So long!"

"Thank you, Marshal!" she said, and he nodded, doffing his Stetson in farewell.

"A nice mess for a prim schoolma'am to be in!" she thought to herself later, though she was elated beyond expression to find herself in the heart of an affair so thoroughly in accordance with her own innate and unconquerable longings.

As she strolled down the school house walk, Deputy Sheriff Dales coasted into view down the Racklack gulch slope. Obviously he had been waiting for her to appear. He was grinning broadly. His eyes were a bit doubtful in their expression, as he invited her, "Hop in and rest yore feet."

"Not till after supper," she sighed. "I'm hungry."

"Suppose we run over to the Hammer Brand—we'll just make it! They sure feed good, there."

"Why, all right," she assented.

He talked mines, cattle, ranches and all the things his sun shone on. A dozen times he kittered up to what was on his mind, only to shy off nervously. The teacher did not help him. But over the barbecued beef at the Hammer Brand Mrs. Luvaine was full of the gossip.

"Dear me, but it's awful!" the rancher's wife declared. "I never would have believed So Boss Parkey would go bad thataway."

"Where'd he ever git to be called So Boss?" Dales inquired.

"When he first showed up out here, he come to work for Dan," Mrs. Luvaine laughed. "That was before he went to war. He was really a comical cuss, and an awful greeny. We had two milch cows for the baby, and Dan, without

thinking told Parkey to go catch them. Next we knew he was out there, hollerin', *'So Boss! So Boss!'* to those two Jerseys, at the top of his voice, for he never had thrown a rope, seems like. Well, course, the hands they sure So-Bossed him from then onwards. Then he took to roping. Seems like when he wasn't shooting, he was throwing his snare. I've seen him catch a jackrabbit, I have, honest!"

"And he's dragged in more'n one coyote, too!" Dan Luvaine added.

"And Mat Cobey," Dales suggested.

"You reckon he roped John Payton, too?" Mrs. Luvaine inquired.

Dales allowed his glance to flutter in the direction of Lena Plack. Had it been merely a look of curiosity he might have escaped the return of suspicion affirmed. Instead, he was too keen, too shrewd in his expression.

"I don't know about it," Dales answered, lamely.

"Isn't it strange what disagreement there is among people," Lena smiled, glancing around cheerfully. "You hardly ever find two people who agree as to which people need hanging, do you?"

Chapter V

HUNTING ANSWERS

WHEN John Payton fully recovered his consciousness, having time to think over the experience through which he had passed, his memories and reflections were far from consoling. He could not tell anyone all that he really knew about his disaster. What he remembered about his car loomed in the midway of his certainties, like a dream.

Editor Rip Van Wayne wrote an account of the discovery of Payton out on the desert, northwest of Racklack. Cunningly he wove into the account hints and innuendoes which emphasized the mystery of the incident. Everyone was curious about the affair, talking with the usual avidity of gossip and surmising.

Payton chose his own time to emerge from his bed. He dreaded to confront the searching, silent gaze of the country's shrewd populace, even from the safe refuge and protection of the cashier's cage in the Racklack bank, where he was backed by the prestige and power of his father. Old Hank was asking no questions of John. Instead, the big, sharp features of the man pecked here and there, looking with gem clear eyes, which were famous for their boring quality, studying, watching, saying nothing to the boy.

But the son knew the signs. His father's anger was deep, silent and relentless. Trust Henry Payton to protect, and seek vengeance for his own! The old man knew through his stool pigeons what was being hinted and talked around, and John soon felt the pleasant thrill of satisfaction as the old man's strength was reaching to throttle those who said things about what was none of their personal affairs.

The cashier presently went back to his job with as wooden a face as he could command, a white kerchief covering the blistered scar around his throat, this bandage partly hidden by the oversize collar he was obliged to wear instead of his usual number 16. Moreover, when he turned to look, his shoulders swung around, a grimace accompanying the least twitch of the sore necklace in his skin. No one made his adventure even a topic of friendly personal inquiry, considering it unsafe to notice what had taken place.

Old Hank fumed, and in the meanwhile he had started a search for the $3,000 roadster which had disappeared, somewhere out in the desert to the northward from Racklack. He went himself to inquire whether anyone had reported the machine at local garages, and telephoned hither and yon to communities along the highways in all directions from Racklack.

A cowman from the Snake Brand ranch remarked that he had seen where a car swung out of the valley trail north of his outfit, and old Payton, of course, soon heard the gossip. Within an hour or two a garage mechanic and the cowman, who was a good tracker, headed for the spot.

There, some twenty-five miles from the highway to Sweetwater Spring it stood perched like a vulture on a low mound. The mechanic looked at the swinging right door, and then at the steering wheel under the top. The cowboy, too, gazed at the two white lines which had held the machine to its course.

The mechanic looked at the levers. "She's in low," he observed.

"And she ran till her tank was empty, too," the man who knew his high plateaus added.

"Somebody jes' naturally tied up the wheel, to steady her, started the motor and turned John Payton loose to go a-riding across country, I bet," the mechanic grinned.

"I don't bet ag'in sure thing propositions," the track reader retorted. "I want a chance with my money."

The mechanic emptied a spare five-gallon can of gas from the service wagon into the roadster's tank. Having cut the two becket lines, the mechanic stepped on the starter, and the machine turned over very slowly.

"She stood with her juice turned on so long her battery is about run down," the mechanic observed.

"I'll drive the service car in," the cowboy offered, but the mechanic said he'd rather do that himself.

They delivered the roadster to old Hank in person, at his big house across the town from the high school. The two described its hiding place in the midst of open, untrammeled desert, minutely using Racklack, Waning Glory and highway bearings.

"So the boy tumbled out of it?" old Hank demanded.

"We could see where it was," the two replied.

"Whoever was driving that car jes' kicked my boy out, that's what he did! By Gawd, when I find him I'll——"

The two did not bat an eyelash. Old Hank could think anything he pleased, and far be it from them to trespass on the processes of the great man's mind. If he knew a lot of things that weren't so, it was none of their business, none whatever.

Old Hank Payton was walking with catlike lightness of footfall, these days. Restlessness marked his coming and going. Encompassing him were mystery circumstances, half told things, and he knew everyone to whom he talked was holding something out on him, not telling him all that might have been revealed.

He sought Sheriff Hotchkiss in the jail office. "Send a posse over to the Waning Glories," Payton ordered, bluntly. "I've a notion some of those scoundrels we need to know about, lie scouting out in those canyons."

"Well, if you think it'll do any good," the sheriff replied with some reluctance.

"I do," Payton said. "Manhandling my boy, tying his wrists, hanging him by the neck—if they want a fight, they'll get it!"

Accordingly, four men in a touring car carrying ample supplies headed into the Waning Glories over the old wood trail, on their way to Lost Ranch, a desolation where three waterless years had devastated a fine cattle grazing land. Wagon crews still grazed that land, but the old stone buildings and crooked cedar stick corrals were unoccupied.

The sheriff sent Under-Sheriff Dales on this trip. Privately, he told Dales Payton's hunch. The cowboy and mechanic, pressed by the wise old officer, had told frankly the fact of the roadster's steering wheel having been lashed to keep it going straight, and then the machine sent on its way in low. Old Payton did not know this, but he had divined enough of the truth to keep his own attention headed for the perpetrator of that outrage on John Payton.

"He isn't going to rest till he gets whoever is pestering him!" the sheriff warned Dales. "We'll have to satisfy him, sure enough. That means bringing in whoever is at the bottom of it."

WHEN the posse arrived at the Lost Ranch, they found no occupant. The indications were, however, that an outfit of some kind had been there recently. Boot and hoof-prints in the rippled dust of wind blown drifts were hardly more than two or three days old. A shoulder of venison, only partly dried in the shade, was good enough to eat, skimmed with black bake as it was. Dishes in the old cookhouse were neatly washed and stacked, and desert mice and chipmunks had not yet made away with all the chunks of dry bread. An automobile, apparently a speed truck, had been there, and at least a dozen or fifteen horses had been watered at the springhole, and grazed on the strong grass up-gulch to the eastward.

Under-Sheriff Dales recognized the importance of this wandering outfit. No information or rumor about it had reached Racklack. For several years a certain degree of quiet inactivity had prevailed in the southern Waning Glories, on account of water failure.

Hiding out here were probably two or three fugitives.

A trapper's cabin back in the mountains rewarded the Racklack County officer's search. True, trappers range everywhere. But such men are supposed to be known to everybody. In this cabin was as pretty an outfit as ever Dales had seen, six or seven kinds of traps, Newhouse, Triumphs, coil spring, jumping kangaroos, high grips and the small number 2's. The man had seven or eight dozen number 5's, both plain jawed and smooth jawed. His blankets, all neatly wrapped in tarpaulins of waterproofed canvas, were the heaviest of weaves, huge Navajos and Mexican goathairs in fancjest colors.

The cabin, hidden in a thick clump of juniper cedars, stood beside a perfectly beautiful granite water spring, the only non-alkaline water Dales had tasted in a year or two. The shack was built of flat stone, laid up as by a brick mason; and the fireplace was a beauty. The success of the trapper was indicated by scores of coyote and lobo skulls, bear and cougar bones, and the skeletons of wildcats and other small stuff. Yet Dales had never heard of anyone trapping the Waning Glories, except ranchers or cowboys of outfits. This was no line cabin; it was the thoroughly well stocked headquarters of a big time trapper. And on pole shelves, along both sides of the cabin, were twenty feet or so of books, standing side by side like a regular town library. Few knew that it belonged to So Boss Parkey, and that he spent winter months there.

"My Gawd!" Dales asked himself, "how can a man have all them books an' not waste 'em, or waste his trappin' time, if he reads 'em?"

Night had come, and Dales spent it in the cabin, hobbling his horse in the spring gully above the shack. Tinned flour and other supplies enabled him to sup luxuriously. He even found an especially fine grade of long cut tobacco with bunches of cigarette papers. The luxury of the cabin was enhanced by a home-made rocking chair, wide and deep, having a seat of burro hide—probably the skin of a wild jackass. Dales remained awake late, just for the sheer comfort he was enjoying.

After breakfast in the morning, when he went out to pick up his horse, he found the rope he had used as a hobble hanging on a cedar branch over the rivulet of water, while his horse was nowhere to be seen or found. Someone had found the cabin occupied, probably smelled the smoke or saw the glimmerings of the flames in the fireplace, and objecting to the intrusion, had quietly stampeded the horse.

Dales gritted his teeth and cursed with loud fluency, but did not better his predicament. Angrily, he shouldered saddle and bridle, made up a lunch, and headed westward out of the Waning Glories on his way back to the Lost Ranch in the foothills. He should have known better; he was a blamed fool. He'd shoot that scoundrel joker on sight! When his awkward, leg straining cowboy boots had begun to get in their fine work on his feet, he was more than furious to find himself in such a predicament.

Dales might have known it wasn't safe to occupy a hidden trap cabin in the wilderness. He was an officer of the law. He was perfectly well aware that of all the refuges of scouting bad men, desperadoes, the one that is safest is a back country trapline.

Having time to reflect as he trudged angrily along, the deputy sheriff planned and schemed a return visit. He would never let the score lie against him in this fashion.

"Huh! So the Waning Glories set yuh afoot, eh?" Sidecutter Keyes, the garage mechanic, jeered him. "I always hearn tell they was ghosts in these mountains, yeh! So hyar you sure met one. How come, Dales?"

"That blinkety-blumped mustang kicked his hobbles into a treetop," Dales replied disingenuously. "An' so he hit the horizon."

"Just romped away, eh?"

"Tha's all," Dales nodded, and the posse turned around to drive back to Racklack. But when Dales went to the pool room, soft drink parlor or the sheriff's office, he found no comforting, soothing sympathy; no, indeed! Men victimized by horseplay or the trickery of others are always the butt and joy of the crowd. Many jeered Dales, but old Hank Payton was too angry for that.

"So you was set afoot theh in the Waning Glories!" he sneered to the unfortunate under-sheriff. "Was the walkin' so good, or have you forgot how to ride? Slept well, didn't you? What'd

I send you there for, anyhow? I didn't want yo' to collect no posies, Dales. I 'lowed you might be useful, catching some calf skimmer, maybe, or anyhow, bringing back information that real men'd be able to use."

Dales turned red and white in blotches. Not many men would have cared to ride the sheriff's able handy man in that way. Old Payton himself noticed the glint, cold as crystal, in the officer's eyes, but disregarded it. He felt that no one would dare make a retort to him.

Sheriff Hotchkiss, witness of the shameful abuse, saw his assistant growing taut, his eyes beginning to glitter. When Payton suddenly turned away, Hotchkiss hurriedly beckoned Dales, who hesitated to come—but finally did with measured footsteps.

"Look here, Dales." Hotchkiss dropped a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Don't take that too hard, understand? You know him—always barking."

"I know, and the hellion *bites*, too!" Dales growled. "I don't let dogs yap——"

"What's the odds, Dales? My Gawd!" Hotchkiss was alarmed.

The under-sheriff turned to head away down the street, looking neither to the right nor to the left, going straight to his boarding-house. He did not appear again until the following morning.

All along the street that night talk was in whispers. A lot of feeling was in the air. Old Hank Payton had done a lot of talking. He had been mighty slighting and mean, the way he said things. Everybody knew that Dales was a good man, a whole lot better than old Hank's own namby-pamby, white collared son, John. And just when John had a whole lot of explaining to do, and a mighty urge to keep his mouth shut, the old bully lets go such a torrent of abuse as had not been heard in years on that street.

When Dales, his face drawn, his eyes still straight ahead, came downtown the next morning, every storekeeper, every citizen he met took pains to greet him, to stop and shake hands with him, *apropos* of nothing, and to talk about cattle or mines or anything under heaven but what he had in mind.

Dales was polite. He clipped his answers to questions. But his face was hard. His eyes were squinting, their blue deep and opaque, and they were cold.

That noon City Marshal Joe Rosewell went up the sidewalk toward the schoolhouse, apparently meeting Superintendent Lena Plack by chance. "Say, Miss Plack!" he greeted her, confidentially. "You heard about the dressing down Dales took from Payton?"

"Of course, for I happened to hear the tail end of it," she nodded.

"You know how Dales felt."

"Yes, I know that, too, Joe."

"He's mad, dangerous. He won't listen to reason from anyone," Rosewell said. "He's held himself in. He done noble; you know that. But thinking it over—course, a man ain't obliged to take that from anybody."

"I admired Dales' self-restraint very much," she said evenly.

"Well, the boys—Hotchkiss and some around—they kind of thought maybe if you'd say something to Dales—you know, you're friendly with him. He might listen to you, if you kind of eased him off a bit."

"And if old Hank was killed up, John would be the head push then?" she sniffed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Just so; an' honest—don't say I said so—that John's about as wuthless a scoundrel as ever ain't been hung yet!"

"Not hung?" she repeated curiously.

"Eh—say! Now that's right!" The marshal laughed lightly, as the girl smiled. "This *did* start in that crease around the boy's throat, didn't it? How come that, do you reckon?"

"I'll see Dales," she evaded. "There he is, now."

She cut down across the school hill slope and intercepted Dales, who was swinging with his gaze fixed straight ahead. "Howdy, Dales!" she greeted him. "I wonder would you just as soon take me over to Prong Horn after school this evening? There's a patch of prickly pear there, which I want to look at, and if I'm in time for the light, to photograph it some."

"Eh?" he blinked, coming out of his trance. "Why sure, if you would——"

Chapter VI

BANK ROBBERY

THE people of the Big Plateau grew conscious of a change in the conditions under which they lived. The valleys, the mountains, the map was

the same, but a mean spirit had darkened the atmosphere.

The shrill voices of laughter, the hoarse taunting barks of good nature and rough play subsided. Racklack was alert and talked in low voices. No inquiry could have explained this change in the spirit of the plateau town. One needed to know all the circumstances in order to realize that countless trivial affairs at last had brought close to a head a lot of mingled and dubious questions. Everybody, for one thing, went over to the sheriff's board and read among the other notices:

$1650 REWARD
WANTED AT RACKLACK,
SO BOSS PARKEY,
COWBOY RIDER
CHARGED WITH MURDER
OF HIS FOREMAN,
MAT COBEY.
DESC. GRAY-BLUE EYES, 160 LBS. 5 FT. 10. REGULAR FEATURES. CASH IN RACKLACK BANK, ON ORDER OF JERRY HOTCHKISS, SHERIFF.

Everyone knew the truth, by this time. Mat Cobey had undertaken to assault with ponderous fists an overworked, weakling boy, when So Boss Parkey had backhanded the murderous bully with a Texas saltgrass and mesquite country noose. Cobey had long needed killing, and now he was dead. But old Hank Payton had chosen to pick up where the brutal foreman had ended.

Everyone knew, now, that So Boss was scouting out not far away. No one was coming in openly with information leading to the capture of the fugitive. Indeed, old Payton was stormful and angrily certain a whole lot of scoundrels were holding out against law and order. Well, he'd show 'em! The accident to John Payton had startled the old man more than he cared to admit. The boy himself refused to tell, or couldn't explain that scabbed ridge around his throat, or the roadster fifteen miles out in the desert.

"Did you go up there looking for Lena Plack?" old Hank demanded.

"Why, I was just riding out there," the boy declared. "I thought maybe I might meet up with her."

"Well, did you?"

"I don't remember what happened, father," the boy answered doggedly.

Payton went to Lena Plack with fire in his eyes.

"Look here, Miss Plack," he demanded. "What do you know about what happened to my boy? He went out to the Waning Glories to find you, you know."

"Why, Mr. Payton, I didn't have the faintest idea he was coming out there," she shook her head. "Of course I didn't expect to or *care* to meet anyone in the mountains!"

"Didn't you know that fellow, So Boss? You went to dances with him?"

"Why, I knew him," she admitted. "And, for that matter, I knew Mat Cobey. I saw him kill Rank Sibley, you know—cold blooded murder of a sickly man by a bully."

"What? What? Now look here, Miss Plack! Do you mean to say you justify So Boss in murdering Cobey?"

"Well, it would depend on what Cobey was doing," she observed judicially.

"Did you see John in the Waning Glories?" Payton returned to his original text.

"Well, not that anyone would tell about!" she replied angrily.

"Look here; you're holding out on me!" He showed his big teeth clenched to her. "You camped just below the concrete dam. Two automobiles came into that place. The boys found the tracks there. They found where two horses had been down the gulch. They tracked one of those automobiles in, out and into the canyon again. The other car came in, and went out. Then about twenty miles back it was headed off across the sage and alkali, where it stopped and was found—my boy's car. Your machine was one, and John's the other. He don't remember anything about going there."

"He must have been drunk, then, don't you think?" she asked sweetly.

"Look here!" he growled, and his voice was heard throughout the school building by the pupils and teachers in morning session. "Do you want me to accuse you of 'saulting him with intent to kill?"

"If you want me to swear out a warrant for his arrest on charges of my own," she replied hotly, with a voice equally penetrating.

Payton gave a startled hiccough. He hadn't foreseen that answer. He had

precipitated a new condition, wherein he was challenged and yet must give his antagonist the choice of weapons.

"Now you get out of this office, Hank Payton!" She held the door open for him. "You leave my affairs to me from now onward. You do not know it, but I've been mighty good to you. I've shown you a favor I shouldn't have shown, I presume. If I hear any more of your talk to me or about me, I'll go before the Racklack grand jury at the next circuit court sitting. But if you leave me alone, I'll go my own way, at my own gait. Get out!"

Payton backed away. No one had talked to him in that scornful, confident tone during many years. He was caught off his guard. He could not tell what cards the young woman held. For himself he did not care; but she held over him a threat against his son. The West would back a woman like her against any man, no matter what his power. Payton rolled away, his anger more subtle and dangerous than ever.

"Look here, you!" The father stood his son in a corner of the president's office in the bank. "You tell me what I'm up against. Do you know Lena Plack's likely to go before the grand jury, accusing you?"

"Wha—what?" the young man choked.

"What'd she do? What'd *you* do?"

"Why—why she just let me know she was going to Sweetwater Springs so I ran over to see her, and I wish—and then I got this on my neck! I passed out——"

"Just sitting there?" Payton demanded. "Has she any case against you?"

"Why no—of course not!"

"But they'd believe a woman, believe anything she said!" Payton exclaimed angrily. "You damned fool! Look what you've done."

He checked himself. "Get out," he told the young man. "Go 'tend to business."

Payton summoned a special meeting of the board of school trustees. Bluntly he stated his views.

"You know how things are, without me talking about them. This woman, Lena Plack, has grown impudent. She's sure as fate holding out for a fugitive from justice, the murderer of Mat Cobey. Her bad example is mighty deteriorating to the morals of her charges, the children of this district. We got to file charges against her, conduct unbecoming a school teacher and get rid of her. Make the motion, Frank!"

"I don't expect I can," Frank Peavey shook his head, doubtfully. "She might sue me for libel, you know."

"What? You won't do's I say? You know me, Frank!"

"Better go slow, Henry," Judge Warton suggested. "You'll have to study the laws a bit. She has a contract with the school district, you know. And on appeal from the county court, she might find her pathway pretty easy into the state. We just renewed her contract, you know, five years at $5,000 a year. $25,000 for just two or three months' work this autumn would be pretty nice for her. She'd sure get it, too, the way things are."

"What do you mean?"

"She'd show Frank, here, owes your bank money; she'd show I'm beholden to you and your cattle partner politically; and she'd show your own animus about John, who chased her over to Sweetwater, and came away with a ridge around his neck, like a hangman's private mark. Probably she could get a hundred thousand slander and libel from you, right now, the way you have been talking since you went up to call her at the office, you know."

"She couldn't win a cent!"

"We've never been in the habit of fooling ourselves," the judge reminded him. "Think it over!"

"Well, what'll we do?"

"Find out where she meets this So Boss," Frank answered.

"You think she really——"

"Then you've some doubts of your own, according to that!" the judge exclaimed. "By your own words!"

Thus openly and often vehemently the associates of Payton gave him the benefit of their observation and viewpoint; otherwise he could not readily have attained so much power and such control of conditions in a land where independence ran with such individual freedom. Impatiently he adjourned the school board meeting. He could not readily veil so public an act as the discharge of a competent teacher and school superintendent behind the fact of his personal spleen. Contract and the backfire of fair play would hold him for the moment

in that direction. He did not veil his disappointed resentment, but he did change his tactics.

CATTLE were coming through in bunches of a hundred to three or four hundred from the ranches, on their way to the railroad shipping pens. The yellow dust whipped away from these passing herds could be seen out along the trails leading from Racklack.

A lot of money came. Cash had to be used to pay off the cowmen, to carry on the mine rolls and to meet the demands of some of the old-timers who were satisfied with nothing but yellow gold or its paper equivalent in yellowback certificates.

Everyone knew the bank was carrying a lot of cash. At the same time only memories recalled the old days before the telephone and telegraph drove hold-ups, wild riding desperadoes off the desert trails.

The abortive school meeting adjourned before nine o'clock on Wednesday night. The Red Lode, most notable of Racklack's dance halls, was strident with music. The several games were running briskly, and old Payton went home to bed. A few minutes later John Payton dropped out his rear window, cut down the slope to Wishbone Alley and joined the sports in the big resort, going upstairs for a game where no one would see him but his immediate associates.

"Oh, Jack!" Wickley, the proprietor caught his ear. "Meet Tipaway Hathers. Stranger—knew him in N'Orleans a long time ago."

Tipaway was a slender, V-jawed, turtle eyed man of perhaps a hundred and thirty pounds. His red tie with yellow spots, his musk perfume and his sleek tonsorial perfections were unmistakable—a dandy from down East. He desired to play the cashier's favorite game, draw poker, and presently five were at this pleasantest of sociable pastimes. Toward midnight the party broke up, Tipaway and Payton going down to dance a turn, later taking their partners to supper in the restaurant.

"Let's take a little ride," the visitor suggested; and accordingly in two cars, roadsters, the couples ran up into the broken country toward the southward, where a pleasant moonlight gave great picturesqueness to a rough and crystal land. A number of people saw them take their cheery departure. No one saw them return.

But in the morning when the bank was opened the vault was found blown from its hinges and bolts. A few coins were scattered on the floor, and the nearest that John Payton could tell from his figures, a hundred thousand dollars in cash was gone, the body of the bank's reserve, in bills of readily negotiable denominations.

A beautiful job, the Reno Superintendent of the Carcajou Investigations, Inc., declared the attack to be. Lou Biggar was a good judge of such affairs, too, for he had been sent into Reno for his health, after long service in the metropolis of New York and a spell in Chicago and St. Louis.

"A sure able band of cracksmen, Mr. Payton!" the detective assured the president of the bank. "They had their nerve, pulling it here, too—with a ton of hides and blankets to muffle the explosion. Um-m. I wonder if any strangers have been in town. Know of any?"

He turned to John Payton, who blinked. "Why, generally there's somebody around, commercial travelers and the like," John declared. "Cowboys, too, especially now that they are driving down feeders and beef stock."

Biggar dropped the subject, left his assistants to look for fingerprints and went prospecting around on his own hook. John Payton, staring at the ruins and listening to his father pledging his fortune over the telephone in return for assistance by a cash shipment in time to meet the needs of this emergency, sat with his hands gripping the arms of the big office chair.

Biggar returned in less than two hours. "Payton," he rasped at the cashier. "Who was that man you played with last night—sport with yellow dotted red tie?"

"What do you mean, *played?*" old Hank demanded. "Who played what last night?"

"The boy here played poker with a stranger, in the Red Lode. Wickley introduced him as Tipaway Hathers. Then the boy, here, with Hathers and Stepping Lida and another girl, went for a ride."

"You played poker last night! And went with one of Wickley's girls?" Old

Hank towered as he glared down at the huddled young man.

"Just a five cent ante, quarter limit," John replied.

"Who was the girl you took?" Biggar demanded.

"She—she was 'Ribbons,' I think they called her," the answer came faintly.

"Where'd they go?"

"Why—I don't exactly know except that they went—they went on—I don't know where."

"Meet any cars?"

"No, not coming in. Met one while going out."

"A big one. It stopped in Wishbone Alley behind the bank and rolled away within an hour," Biggers declared. "They had from 2:30 o'clock till 9:15 when the raid was discovered, about seven hours, for the getaway. That means more than two hundred miles, and any number of places to hide, tourist camps, ranches, trains on three railroads. They did well."

Chapter VII

So Boss Guides

So BOSS PARKEY, riding for Wake Up Dawson, but living away out toward the summit ridge of the Waning Glories, carried a Claw-Bar iron with which to brand calves which he found up the canyons and gulches. Only Wake Up knew So Boss was back there. The rancher would have been puzzled for an explanation to give for going against the cattle owners in this cowboy case, but deep in his soul his reason was clear enough. Old Hank Payton had been charging Dawson ten per cent. interest on loans, and taking a bonus besides at each renewal. Moreover, Dawson was offended by the big fellow's airs. Payton in his day had been ordinary, too, just a cowboy, prospector and range wanderer himself. And if ever a man had needed killing, Mat Gobey was the one.

A cowboy would have plenty to do on this line riding job. The country was not new to the scouter. For years Parkey at intervals had drifted back into the wilds to hunt, trap and dwell amid the lonesome geologic tumult. A better nature student than he ever bragged, So Boss had used the Waning Glories as a kind of refuge from his own disappointments where he could find a new perspective.

Parkey had awaited news from Racklack with a good deal of anxiety. When Wake Up Dawson brought the gossip about the curious hangman's noose mark on John Payton's throat, and the story of the long automobile ride in low gear off across the pathless wastes of sage and alkali, the shrewd gaze of the rancher indicated a suspicion which was not voiced. So Boss laughed, making no explanation. But as he rode he played with his rope till his arms were tired with throwing and whipping the noose up, down and all about. When he wasn't trying lariat experiments he was shooting his .22 six-gun, loaded with rim fire shells, practicing accuracy and speed.

"I'll need all I have, some time," he remarked to himself.

One day over at the outrider's cabin he found visitors. A cowboy, Kit Staurig, had guided in a party of sports, he explained, and they were looking over the Waning Glories for the fun of shooting game and seeing the country. They wanted more help, Staurig said, and as Parkey had horses, trapline cabins, an outfit and knew the country, he readily assented to adding the job of guide for these good fellows among whom were no weaklings.

There were five of the strangers, and they were alert, cool tongued and watchful. They eyed So Boss with keen but disarming scrutiny. Kit called So Boss "Tungsten," the name he went by in Wake Up's outfit book. They wanted to find cougar, bear, deer, and anything else big enough to shoot, they declared. At $5 a day, they were welcome employers.

"There's plenty of game around," So Boss told them. "Right much from here into the summits and down yon side flanks. Good shooting on all sides."

In three days the four sports all had shot game, killing two bears, four deer and a cougar, which not only testified to the new guide's knowledge of the country, but to the deadly accuracy of the visitors' shooting. Then one day the four sportsmen crossed the divide into the valley north from Racklack, saying they were going after supplies. Kit Staurig, the cowboy, remained with So Boss.

"Course, we mind our own business," Kit said, after the others all had taken

their departure. "You know that, Tungsten?"

"And I mind mine," So Boss replied, promptly. "I suppose every man has more or less reason to."

THE two spent the day washing out and knuckling brains into the hides of the bears and cougar, tanning them. Kit was nervous, rather anxious in his bearing. All of the sports had been watchful as few strangers are who come to the big country from thickly settled regions. Not one but noticed the noise when a deer's hoof rolled a stone one night when two were playing checkers and three were playing cards.

Kit was, toward night, more than usually alert, pacing up and down like a caged leopard. The lines of his face deepened. The strain was obvious, but So Boss himself gave no sign.

"If you wanted to, we could ride south," the cowboy suggested. "I've a camp about twelve miles below here, which we could make before dark. Then I could circle around a bit in the morning, looking things over for Wake Up —you know, the rancher."

"All right, let's go!" Kit exclaimed, and the two rode away. Kit was delighted to have something to do, and he stared at the trapper cabin hidden in the junipers of a level bench.

"Don't many know about this?" Kit suggested.

"No, they don't," the cowboy admitted. "Good water here, too, but it's a sinkhole spring; cattle can't reach it, just small game. I chased a wounded wolf through here, and found him in the waterhole. I could hear the water dripping back in, so I found it. I put a pail in, and in about twenty minutes I catch enough for man and horse. At the same time, nobody knows about it."

"We could all hang out over here, couldn't we?"

"Yes, and there are other cabins, too, in these mountains."

"That nobody knows, Tungsten?"

"That no one but me has seen for years, Kit."

When toward evening on the following day the two returned to the Sink Hole camp, they found the four others had returned. They all looked sharply at Kit and So Boss. Kit told casually about their night over at the hidden spring camp.

"He has other trapline cabins that nobody but him has seen, too," Kit observed. The cowboy, who was hanging the saddles of a venison yearling over an open fire for a gaucho roast in the green skin, went on with his salting and peppering. At the same time no tone, and few gestures were lost on his attention. The sports were tense, watchful and nervous. A lively hour had struck for them. Their faces showed their strain.

When the hair had all been singed off the deer hide, and the meat was delicious in its rich flavor, all hands set to making the evening meal; the eagerness of the hunters rose into exhilaration. They laughed, drank liquor, of which they had ample stores, and then with sly innuendo began to reveal to their guide their understanding of his own dilemma. They hinted broadly about those who must hide. Without directly speaking, with mere glances of the eye and knowing smiles, it was plain they knew he was a fugitive.

"You're one of us!" Kit himself said at last. "Why don't you tie in with a real mob, eh?"

"What's the big idea?" the cowboy inquired.

They were not yet ready to tell. Their excitement, however, prepared the guide for the suggestion that they all go back from the Sink Hole camp into the fastnesses of the rocky wilderness of the interior of the Waning Glory Range to those hidden camps of the trapline. Kit knew the way, now to one of these. The party began to pack up their duffel there in the late afternoon. They demanded to be taken at once. When the cowboy hesitated, Rupert, a wizened man, with the suggestion of a hawk hump across his shoulders gave the order, "Come on! What you hanging back for?"

"If you're riding out, boys, you'll need to carry bags to wrap the horses' hoofs in, you know," the cowboy replied, quietly. "To go in a bunch would leave tracks any rider could follow on a run."

"That's right, boys!" Kit declared. "He's right, riding at night you can't cover your tracks. And you got to scatter on it, too."

"But these damn' rocks!" Rupert, who now assumed leadership, snarled.

"Look't where they'd have us—so easy!"

Clearly he was a man of cities and paved streets. The boulders and cloven mountains, the fastnesses of fractured wilderness gave him no feeling of safety or of hiding. His snakelike eyes with milky pupils, turned from Kit to the rider and back again.

"You know this game!" he suddenly turned. "Look here, you're So Boss Parkey, and we know that. We'll show our cards to you. You're on the hide yourself. We've straight tips, you know. Sheriff Hotchkiss, at Racklack's riding for you, and maybe he'll be coming this way, up that line."

"I don't know you so well," Parkey replied.

"We had it straight. Kit here knew you. I want to get out of this country. What you say? Kit says stay a while, till things quiet down."

"Depends on what they're looking for," Parkey replied.

"They're looking for a hundred grand, Racklack bank money," Kit said.

"You stuck it up!" the cowboy looked from face to face, his own features now hard and blank. "You got away with it?"

"A starlight job, Tungsten," one explained. "In after dark and out before day. We come away in the big hat's own car——"

"We had a pigeon around," Kit added. "We were next to young Payton—tanked him up, tolled him out beyond the butte; and he's no alibi now. We've got him framed, if we must. He's no good, you know. They'll suspect him."

"Yes, I know he's no good," the cowboy looked around, thoughtfully. "I reckon we'll ride tonight. I'll say we'd best do so."

He did not take them to the camp Kit had visited. Instead he carried them northward. At intervals, he scattered and doubled them back on their tracks around knobs, and single filed them through grim lands where at dawn they came to a pool of clear but alkaline water. They breakfasted and then slept a few hours. Soon after noon they trekked away again. Kit, the only Westerner in the group, besides the guide, saw the timbered mountains ahead of them. Beyond that divide were other countries, greater desolations, and a railroad. The high peaks in sight were covered with snow. The wind that swept the plateaus was raw with the tang of approaching winter.

They came to the remote fastness.

"If we come down on yon side together," Parkey assured them, "we're gone. Here's where we'll have to scatter. I happen to know a deputy sheriff found one of my line cabins. You came up the valley east of this Waning Glory Range, and crossed into my camps. Hell! They'll have your tracks, they'll find Payton's car you had; probably they'll find the one you took to town, and trace that till they find where you got it. Even if you did rustle it in San Francisco they'll know you were there, probably, and they'll nail you wherever you show your faces, now."

"That's right," Kit nodded. "The moment anybody sees you, you're spotted; and if you're caught, the paper goods lands you in Dutch *pronto*."

A murmuring rose from the Eastern bandits. They consigned this wide open country to the depths of eternal despair. They had been inveigled, apparently, into a land whose very spaciousness was a trap to catch them.

"Looks like we're in a bag, with a puckering string," Kit mused morosely.

"If you'd let me know beforehand, what game you played, the going might have been a lot leveler," Parkey retorted rather sharply.

"You do what we tell you!" Rupert snarled, with injudicious break of his nerves.

"Who you talking to?" Parkey retorted, covering the five with his blue barreled revolvers. "*Up!*"

For an instant the Easterners hesitated, making no move. The muzzles held center on Rupert and one called Flanalo. Then these two put their hands up, the others following suit as the muzzles turned in their direction. They faced away, on the command. Then Kit as ordered went along the line pulling out the automatics which his fellows packed.

"I'll take your saddlebags, too," Parkey declared, adding humorously, "You got too much for darn' fools to be carrying around. When I take a chance I'm paid for it—high!"

The gangsters had played a crooked deal on a fellow fugitive. They had let him into all this mess, when he was in trouble enough of his own. Succinctly and with biting words, Parkey reminded

Kit, especially, that he knew Parkey, had worked him as a guide, and knowing that if the posse found Parkey with them he would be regarded as one of the gang—when he wasn't.

"So I'm all through with you, now," Parkey declared. "You're going through the pass, there, while I'm going about my own business, minding it the same as usual. Kit, take that bag of grub, and go ahead. The others pick up the water cans and blankets, and mosey."

They could go or stay and take what he cared to give them. They obeyed. And when they had gone half a mile or so they stopped. A familiar sound a few yards to the left made them turn and go on. A .33 caliber rifle bullet glancing on a rock and screaming on its course has a persuasive quality difficult to resist. The man who had hijacked them made no move to depart till they had gone on a mile up that wide bare valley toward the pass over the timbered mountains.

Then they saw So Boss Parkey driving their bunch of horses ahead of him, turning westward over the sagebrushed, rolling lands that marked the north end of the Waning Glory Range. They debated whether it would be worth while to go back and see if the cowboy had left anything for them. Kit shook his head at the proposal.

"He give us all we was to have," the former cow country rider declared. "We double-crossed him, getting him in without his knowing it. Course that let him out."

Chapter VIII

The Hard Choice of Crook or Dupe

JOHN PAYTON could not overcome his confusion when confronted with the fact that he had not been in sight during the crucial hours from nearly eleven o'clock till after dawn on the night of the robbery of the Racklack bank. Moreover, Tip-away Hathers, Ribbons and Stepping Lida, his three companions were nowhere to be found. His claim that Ribbons had accompanied him home from the desert starlight drive was unsubstantiated. Old Hank Payton, his father, was only too ready to harbor the worst possible suspicions.

"You find 'em!" Old Hank shook his huge fist in the air, talking to Lou Biggar of the Carcajous. "Get whoever done it; he's a thief, whoever done it. Don't mind me; *get 'im!*"

The detective was open minded. The people of Racklack were not. Most of them enjoyed the sudden bitterness and difficulty which assailed the burly, bullying man who so long had dominated the country.

The riders from the Trenal ranch, away to the northward of Racklack found an automobile over at the base of the Waning Glories, up a coulee. This proved to be Payton's own big touring car. It had been run out of his garage, and on its wheel and side doors were found three sets of fingerprints. These checked nicely with the records of the Carcajou agency. Here were not only prints of John Payton's and his father's fingers, but of Turkey Rose Lavaskin, Snipe O'Greve and Paster Luke, all excellent cracksmen and unfavorably known as villains of a number of exceedingly illegal transactions with steel boxes at night, and fiduciary institutions by day. The fact that the big touring car was the fastest in town meant nothing compared to the ownership.

No one made any open charges, of course. But how did it happen that the burglars rolled away in Henry Payton's automobile? The old banker rancher was bringing in money to meet the loss, was paying his own usual ten per cent. on the borrowings to do it, and he was feeling the wrench. He was going out now to beg for help, instead of being a lender. His only hope of surviving the unforeseeable crash in his own prospects left him obliged to pay dollar for dollar on his own obligations or go into ruin.

Forced to raise funds to meet $100,000 on a day's notice, old Hank made terrific sacrifices. His own peril forced him to ignore other troubles. The So Boss Parkey reward notice still stood uncancelled, though posses stopped hunting the cowboy.

Then an odd rumor began to circulate over the tables and on the waxed floor of Wickley's dance hall. Out of thin air came the report that Jack Payton's pals of the night, Stepping Lida and the rest, had made their getaway; could not be found.

Biggar, hearing the tip through Eastern offices of the Carcajou came to

Cashier Payton to get the facts in the matter. He had something tangible to start on, of course. "We've found Stepping Lida," he declared. "She claims Ribbons and Tipaway Hathers were lookouts of this gang. She says they worked on you, to get you away, and you knew they were crooks. Ribbons and Lida had a fall-out in San Francisco, and Ribbons left her flat. How much do you know, now?"

Wiping his forehead, the cashier declared that he had drunk a little, played cards, flirted some, but when he rolled away it was for sport. He had no suspicion that a job was going to be pulled off. He knew where his bread and butter were, even if he could have thought of being party to robbing his own father. But he could not escape both horns of his dilemma.

"Then you claim they played you for a sucker?" Biggar asked, bluntly.

"Yes, I was a fool," Payton acknowledged. "I thought it was smart to travel, to play with that kind."

Lena Plack's smile hurt John Payton worst of all. When she cashed her September salary warrant at the bank, she omitted her usual pleasant greeting. She merely looked at him with rather an amused expression. He was suffering from a kind of merciless retribution. Shamed beyond measure by her contempt, he flushed and paled in succession. This was their first encounter since that night when he went so suddenly into tortured oblivion. He could but wonder what trick she had played on him.

"You've had a bad time of it," she said. "Too bad!"

The unexpected sympathy, the only expression of the kind he had had from anyone, shook him more than anger or blame had done.

"I haven't seen anything of you lately," she reminded him further, and took her departure.

He was in trouble. She was kind. His father's disapproval had made him one to be avoided by everyone. He went to the boarding-house, and almost before his big roadster stopped she started down the walk to the street as though she had been waiting for him to take her riding.

"What happened?" she demanded when they were up the slopes of the pilot butte. "I mean the night of the bank burglary."

He told her the truth. And he added hastily, "I've had my lesson, Lena; I don't know what you did to me, that night out at Sweetwater; but you did it right and complete."

She made no comment. Sometimes a man has one lesson, learns it, but soon needs another even more.

"But you know So Boss is in bad, now," Payton went on confidently. "He's been riding over in the Waning Glories, for Wake Up Dawson. Back in that country he has a trapline. He's a wolver. Dales located one of his cabins over there, and we're bound to get him, now. He tells me all that's going on. They think I don't know what the Carcajous are doing, but I'm not fooled. My wisdom teeth are cut. Some would like to tie things onto me, but they can't do it. I got my eyes open. Some day I'll bring So Boss in myself, likely enough. He's an Easterner, you know, one of those college riders. He brought in one of those yeggman gangs to rob the bank. They know some of them who worked with So Boss—found finger prints on dad's car they rode out in. They're tracing the car they abandoned here in Racklack to take ours. You see, they pretended to be sports hunting in the Waning Glories, and we know for certain So Boss was with them. We'll find a squealer before long, probably the first one that's picked up, no matter where he's caught."

"Where's Dales?" Lena asked, abruptly.

Young Payton hesitated. Like everyone else, he did not want to talk about the deputy sheriff, who had been so harshly taunted and called down by old Hank Payton. "Hotchkiss sent him up north to cool off, I expect," the son admitted. "Dad rode him pretty hard. You know how the old man is when he's mad. Dales will be all right, though. He hadn't any right to let So Boss get away. And, course—well, you know, some think he roped me."

"Do they?" she inquired. "Would they hold that against him?"

He hung his head.

Dales came unannounced to Lena at Mrs. Clevelax's one evening, and said, "Hotchkiss told me you'd like to see me?"

"Yes? I wondered where you were," she admitted.

"I was sent wild goosing into the northern Waning Glories," the deputy replied. "That was to let me live down my mad, I reckon. What do you want?"

"Nothing at all, if your tone indicates your feeling about me," she answered him, quietly. "I did not tell anyone I wanted to see you. I presumed you were minding your own affairs, and let it go at that. Of course, the reason Hotchkiss sent you to me was in the hope that you would talk things over with me. Whether you do or not doesn't matter a particle to me."

"Oh, say now, Miss Plack!"

"I understand the situation perfectly, Dales," she went on. "Old Payton called you down, instead of minding his own business. Because he did that, you're holding it against me and everyone else."

"I am not. My Gawd——"

"If you expect me to coax you into good nature," she went on, "get over the notion. I was in hopes, though, you'd tell me about your first trip into the Waning Glories. It's none of my business, of course. I was interested in a friend. I heard you found a camp over there."

"Why, sure I did," he blurted out. "I was tracking around, when I came to a juniper bench, out from a gulch with good water. A stone cabin had been laid up there with alkali 'dobe clay, probably on a trapline. Some good wolf traps and smaller traps hung there. A lot of books, too. When I went back there on my way north, the outfit was all gone, and the camp abandoned. I circled off north, and found the sports' camps. They had some good horses, the way they climbed the slopes and walked. Pretty nervy riders, too, from the looks of the tracks, where they ran them. Four crossed the Waning Glories and left their horses in west of the Trenal ranch up one of the draws. They had a car cached there, which they drove across in to the road. When they came back they had old Hank's car, and left it in the draw. You know all that. Sheriff and Biggar drove Payton's car back, and I rode on north, the way I was told to. Then Wake Up Dawson talked some."

"Yes?"

"Yes; funny about him," Dales puzzled. "You see, So Boss and the sports eased through on the east side of his pasture mountains. We're both surprised about So Boss being with those yeggmen. That cowboy never did mean to harm anybody. Lots of us believe he didn't mean to break Mat's neck, anyhow. Can't make old Payton see it thataway! Mat sure always talked mean and slightin' to anybody. But even if So Boss butted in for Jimmy Duggal, nobody can figure him robbing a bank; not yet. Course, scouting out if he was broke, he might, account of needing money. But So Boss has a money belt. He didn't need to steal anything, unless, course, he wanted to hand old Hank a facer. If he done that, he sure has left Payton stewin' in his own fat. Naturally, about So Boss, as he's on the romp, maybe he might grow careless; but I don't see him thataway, nohow."

"I'd hate to think of him turning thief," Lena admitted. "He might be real careless, but not apt to steal things."

"That's the way I figure," Dales shook his head. "Course, if he's desperate, it sure looks bad."

THE countryside was aroused, posses riding out in hopes of winning a reward. Gradually everyone learned that the bank safe blowers had posed as sportsmen shooting game in the Waning Glories, to cover their attack on the Racklack institution. The authorities and detectives ransacked the land, but their efforts were apparently quite fruitless. The desperadoes had made their getaway.

"Now look't So Boss; the fool's done robbed a bank!" was a word also passed.

Lena Plack learned that the semi-criminal gamblers, nomadic vagabonds, and habitués of the Red Lode all were laughing up their sleeves, delighted in the turn of events. They gave So Boss Parkey credit for having contrived to wrap old Hank's boy in suspicion, too. The boy was proved to be either a double-crosser or a dupe.

Old Hank and his son, Dales and the Wickley crowd were all running to cover. They had met an overwhelming setback, and were whining. And one day another story was added to the many already circulating. The Carcajous had picked up Snipe O'Greve, whose finger prints had been dusted and photographed

on the automobile in which the yeggmen made their getaway out of Racklack. Snipe promptly confessed. John Payton had told about the money he was handling, how much was in the vault for cash payments in the cattle deals. Stepping Lida passed this information on to Ribbons, who in turn let Tipaway know. Then Rupert and his mob had undertaken the job, having two cowboys who had gone bad, one Kit Staurig and the other a local badman, name of Tungsten or So Boss!

"Then the cowboys ditched us, took the iron men, and we hit tourists for rides till we could get away with a car of our own," Snipe declared. "And never again the open wilds for me!"

Confronted with this confession, Cashier Payton saw his father's rage going beyond bounds, becoming apoplectic and full of the bitterness of despairing suspicion. The joy of his hopes had proved tasteless ashes. He sought his son. "Get out!" he commanded hoarsely, without preamble. "Never *show* yourself to me again!"

John Payton left the bank office, climbed into his roadster and started the motor. Biggar, the Carcajou superintendent, intercepted him. "Don't try to make a getaway," Biggar ordered. "Where you going?"

"I don't know," Payton shook his head hopelessly.

"You'd better make a clean breast of the whole business, hadn't you?"

"You go to hell!" Payton replied.

Biggar shrugged his shoulders, turning away. Payton drove northward into the shadows of coming night. The years of his ease and sloth were ended, now. Having put off paying for his many abused privileges, he was heading out to seek the common necessities of livelihood. He could handle figures, keep books, do bank routine—but who would hire him to do these things now? Of other skills he had only those of a chauffeur, which he exercised as he rolled away.

Chapter IX

THE HEART OF A FUGITIVE

THE last thing So Boss Parkey would have chosen to be was an outlaw. The misfortune of a rope tangled on the horn of his saddle, just when he would have eased the strain of the noose on Mat Cobey's neck, had made a killer of him. Having fought in the war, he was not unaccustomed to the feeling of blood on his own hands. He had gone over the top and met a strong enemy hand to hand, bayonet to bayonet and muzzle to muzzle. But his indignation against being linked up, perhaps in irrevocable disgrace, with a band of yeggmen was not at all assuaged by the fact that he had recovered all their undivided loot. Riding with it dangling from his own saddle, he wondered what to do.

The impulse to chuck it was easily overcome. The safe thing to do was go a thousand miles into some other environment, as buying real estate or logging. Across the wild lands called heart to heart, however, so the cowboy renegade from his college, his family, and even from his natural abilities returned to the southern Waning Glories to hide out in a cave low down on Nipple Top Butte with his captured horses grazing in three different valleys, and the several riggings hidden out where he could find them. The bank money, too, was carefully cached to await some decision as to its disposal. Owing old Hank Payton a lefthander, So Boss was human enough to be glad at the banker's worry; for the *Puncher's* editor, Rip Van Wayne, did not fail to praise the big fellow's great personal sacrifice in pledging his entire fortune to make good the bandit loss. That meant Payton was hard pushed.

So Boss met Wake Up Dawson back in the mountains. The rancher's greeting was reserved, his gaze level and neutral. Obviously, the cattleman's mind had changed in some measure. At the same time he was a square dealer.

"I came lookin' for you," Wake Up declared. "You know how 'twas. While you hadn't done nothin' but a killin', I'd hold no hard feelings. But this here bank robbin', now, is a sight different. But for old Hank's puttin' up to make the deeficit good, I'd had eight-nine thousand of my own money tied down theh; see how *that'd* be! How'd I look, hirin' a feller that's robbed them safety vaults 'at pertected my money, huh?"

"You think I'm a thief? All right, if that's the way you feel about it," So Boss replied. "I'm obliged for what you've already done for me."

"Well, you see how 'tis, don't you? What else could I think, anyhow?"

"I get you, old-timer," So Boss declared. "Don't blame you. Murderin' don't matter, but monkeyin' with banks is sure hell!"

"But, my Gawd, Parkey! What—oh, shucks, you stayed with 'em!"

"Did I?" So Boss looked around as though for lost company.

Wake Up Dawson blinked. So Boss told nothing. He accepted Dawson's accusation without a word, though the distrust had, of course, cut, and made the cowboy's lip corner lines deepen.

"What could I think, So Boss?" Dawson demanded, partly angry and partly trying to get something he could believe.

"I don't know," the cowboy replied, his voice as frank and crisp as the rattle of a snake's tail. "I've been around these parts ten years, Dawson. I never rode a man in my life. I've done a day's work before I asked the pay. I asked no favors, gave no odds to any damn' hired hand. Now I'm riding out for killing a man, Mat Cobey. Remember, Dawson, you sat on the jury the last time he done meanness, himself. He shot a white man down at the Red Lode, account of him not drinking Wickley's liquor. You voted to acquit Cobey. You had to, on account of old Hank Payton holding your notes! That let Cobey loose to kill anybody he wanted to. Accidentally, he was tangled too tight into my rope; but I don't see any jury fixed to acquit me—no! My hoss isn't the right color, that's all. Understand, Dawson, you favored me a heap. No matter what you do now, it won't make no difference for what I owe you—those long days when I had to ride alone, and you gave me confidence and a job. Course, now I'm embarrassing you. People look at the Waning Glories, wondering am I here, and who are my friends."

"Hold on, Parkey," Dawson called as the cowboy turned to leave. "Let this lie where it falls. If you need beef, kill a Claw-Bar where you find it. If you need salt, take it from the Claw-Bar storehouse—or anything else. I don't know if you was in the bank raid, or not. I don't care. But you said a heap, saying I helped acquit Mat Cobey. I passed a damn' bad egg on for you to smell of. Next time I sit on a jury I won't forget."

"Would you be my friend?" the cowboy inquired.

Dawson's jaw dropped, he blinked and then he snapped his teeth shut, angrily. "No, by Gawd, I won't! I'll play the law the way the cards lie!"

"That's fine, Wake Up. I want to shake your hand for saying that," the cowboy exclaimed. "That's all I ask. The way things look, the deck's against me. At the same time, because you've treated me white, Wake Up, I want to say I didn't mean to kill Mat Cobey—tangled my line on the saddle horn as I backhanded the noose. And I didn't know the sports were crooks till they came in from the raid. I can't prove it. As long as old Hank rides the law, and nobody else can, it's his bridle rein to gee or haw. So I'll mosey along, now."

"Riding for me yet, So Boss?"

"Not now, Wake Up. 'Tain't fair to you. They know I'm back here."

So Boss headed back into the mountains, but swung wide to keep Wake Up from having definite knowledge of his intentions. What others knew wouldn't be hurting the fugitive now. Winter was not far away, with its blizzards and its terrible inclemencies. The fur already was beginning to grow prime, the skins white. The scouter could keep far back and high up, clear of the skylines and open places.

The fugitive looked across the open plateau at Racklack. Around the cattle country court seat the land was open and bare. Except for the tumult of rough mountains that marked the town site, a belt of sage and alkali nearly fifty miles wide surrounded the town. The town offered the only hiding place anywhere there. To venture into the cluster of houses was putting one's head literally into the law's noose. So Boss Parkey hesitated thus to tempt fate. Yet the day came when he rode one of the horses down to the desert and all night long traversed the levels to arrive in Racklack in the starlit hours before dawn.

He could trust no one. He must take his luck as it happened to break for or against him. When dawn was at hand, his horse had been turned loose, his saddle and bridle were safely hidden under a floor in an abandoned homestead shack at the edge of town, and he himself rather snug in the upstairs of the old bottle house so close to the Red Lode that the strident music was a quavering

delight in his ears as it vied with the whining of the morning wind through the sheet metal of the roof and sides of the abandoned establishment.

Wrapped in saddle blankets and a tarpaulin, So Boss slept soundly nearly all day long. He had a good can of water. His lunch bag was well filled. He ate supper as the sun set, and when the streets of the town were quite dark, he changed into one of the suits of clothes which had chanced to be part of the loot he had taken from the sports when he set them afoot.

A fine brown corduroy suit, with laced hunting boots, a moderate brimmed nutria hat, a wide aviator's belt, and soft gray shirt quite completely changed the appearance of the cowboy. He had let his not inconsiderable whiskers grow. He now left the mustache and trimmed out a goatee, with a safety razor. When he slipped down from his hiding place to walk along the streets of Racklack in the dim gloom he was very sure no one could recognize him. He looked like a high grade mining engineer, in this outfit.

He circled carefully, taking note of the several cars which were parked along the sides of the thoroughfares. He did not know which one of these he might need, so he made sure of no less than six which were convenient.

Then having taken whatever precautions he could, So Boss cut over to the east end of Racklack, where he went to lurk in the shadows of a vacant house nearly opposite the Widow Clevelax's, where Lena Plack boarded.

He watched the big corner room of the second story opposite, where drawn curtains hid the well illuminated interior. The shadow cast at intervals on one or another of the pale windows thrilled the watcher. Presently, when the light went out, he crossed the street to wait against the fence of what had been the big house of the town, but which now enclosed the ruin of a burned dwelling.

Sure enough, walking briskly, her heels clicking on the hard baked clay, Lena Plack came for her stroll in the night wind. Her day's work was done; she had glanced impatiently through several books and magazines, restless in the fact that she needed exercise; despite the sharp, cold, dry wind she headed for the open sage and alkali.

Thus she saw a figure leave the sidewalk ahead of her and go out into the mid-street where as she came opposite a voice greeted her quietly.

"I don't know if I'm welcome, Miss Plack?"

"Eh—who are you? You here?" she exclaimed, wondering, her voice as low and cautious as his own.

He walked to her, she took his arm and they strolled beyond the house limits into the area of dumped tin cans, old automobiles, bedsprings, broken baby carriages and other signs of junk more than worthless. She looked back, uneasily. Far ahead of them, coming out of the east, was the headlight flash of an automobile, probably twenty miles distant. She turned from the road to go out across the sage and wind drifted sand and blown bare gravel. Half a mile distant they came to a veritable cut bank, where she sat down.

"Now tell me about it," she demanded, breaking the silence between them.

"About what?"

"Bank robbery, desperadoism—the very latest of your afflictions."

"Well, what do you believe? What have you heard?"

"I beg pardon, I'm not being examined," she declared, rather tartly. "I don't mind telling you my surprise. You know, well enough, I am not so overly narrow minded."

"Do you think I'd rob a bank?"

"I've heard a lot of the evidence. I could forgive a man who protects a badly abused boy. If you are a thief, I much prefer you'd go away. I don't expect you to confess. I do hope you think enough of me—I mean I wish you wouldn't lie to me. I don't think you ever have. At the same time you come to me in disguise. It hurts to see a good man compelled to hide his identity. Do you appreciate what I mean?"

"I think so," he nodded.

"Here you are, with a fine education, a mind trained to the high qualities of civilization, herding cattle, cursed by an ignorant brute who wasn't fit to take care of your furnace——"

"Excuse me!" he interrupted. "Mat Cobey knew the cattle country so well that he could ship from one to two thousand head of beef annually, where no other man had succeeded in shipping more than three to five hundred head. You see, he was a producer. His failure was a cruel streak, a terrific con-

tempt for incompetence. You have shown the same intolerance at my own intellectual disaster. I had not thought of it in that way before."

"Well, I won't deny I hate to see a good mind wasted, its owner hanged for murder, even," she shivered. "But better that than reversion to the old days of savage grasping, theft. I mean I could excuse your being hung, as a martyr. I couldn't ever forgive you for stealing. Oh, I like two or three cattle rustlers among my acquaintances, but you are not the thief type, I hope."

He made no comment. The posses, the information gathered, now proved beyond denial that So Boss Parkey had been the guide for the bandits who had posed as sportsmen. The *Puncher* had printed the facts. The papers which Wake Up Dawson had wrapped up to leave where the scouter could pick them up were only too explicit.

"I didn't know about the holdup till the gang came in the next day," he said. "They knew I was hiding out. They took it for granted I'd ride with them. They thought I'd be glad to take a handout, such as they would toss to some nester that fed them. Snipe O'Greve's confession puts the whole business up to me, the Racklack *Puncher* says."

"You were the one who could best plan the whole affair," she observed.

"Kit Staurig, another cowboy, did that, though," So Boss said. "I tell you I didn't know what they were, till afterward."

"He says you double-crossed them, held them up and took all the loot."

"So I read," he answered, glumly.

"I would not have imagined you double-crossing anyone," she said.

"Only Mat Cobey."

"Oh!" she caught her breath. "I see. I would like to have you forgive me."

"Forgive you?" he repeated.

"Yes," she replied. "I have no right to mistrust you. After all, I'm as bad as the others. I've cross-questioned you like a prosecuting attorney, when I should have asked instead what I can do to help you. I'm sorry."

"You need not be at all," he assured her. "I'm worse than you know."

"You stood guard over me, you remember," she observed. "I am under obligations for that. I should be willing to overlook many failings in you."

"I want to tell you my chief dismay was to think perhaps you would doubt me," he suddenly explained. "I don't mind confessing an outlaw's career rather has attracted me. A fugitive's need of constant alertness summons unexpected instincts to daily service, I find. I'm afraid the call of adventure has overset my morals. Theft was a primitive virtue in a way. I mean successful stealing at one time was praiseworthy. Competition is only a survival of the old necessity of getting the best of the other fellow. A hero overwhelms his adversary, right or wrong."

She laughed. "You have such absurd ideals as that?" she inquired pertly.

"I wish I really could stifle my conscience," he admitted, soberly.

"Why?"

"If I could believe everything is fair in love as in war."

"Oh!" she stirred uneasily, a little breathlessly.

"You see, I've not really escaped civilization," he went on. "In fact, I am badly betwixt and between. You know I despise Jack Payton; at the same time those bank robbers played him for a fish; the lookouts did. I know that."

"Then you—I mean—" she stopped in confusion.

"I can't talk," he said. "I just have to tell you if they think Jack Payton was in on robbing his father, his own bank, I know different. Even if I don't like him, I'll have to come in and testify to what I know, if he's tried."

"You'd do that even if they—if you were caught?"

"Sure! What's the odds?"

"You dear boy!" the young woman most unexpectedly threw her arms around Parkey's neck, kissing him. But his attempt to embrace her was so belated she escaped, with a laugh, his laggard arms. But perhaps the look she gave him was better, more satisfactory than holding her would have been.

"You've proved your conscience!" she went on, as he sat staring at her in the starlight, stunned with astonishment at the significance of his own and her demonstrations. She went on, "You could not more completely prove your own generosity than by thus clearing Jack!"

"Why, I couldn't let him be convicted falsely."

"How did you come in?" she asked.

"I rode a horse in, but I turned him

loose. He'll be picked up at the water, or grazing, but he's wearing a Montana brand, which won't mean anything. He's one they brought in, the robbers. He's evidence, I suppose, if he should be recognized. I planned to borrow one of four or five autos I've spotted."

"Don't steal a car to go away," she said. "You don't have to. When you are ready to go I'll give you a lift. I can, out on whatever road you want. You took a big chance to meet me, for I've an idea I've been shadowed, myself. The Carcajou detective, Biggar, has talked to me rather more than necessary, I think—very shrewd and quite misleading, that fellow. I'm glad you came to me. I was wondering, you know."

"I haven't told you exactly everything," he confessed, doubtfully. "It's my funeral. I wanted to know all I could. I just wished you'd kind of suspend judgment a while. And talking tonight straightens out my own mind."

"You know, I've found two of the most beautiful ice plants—crystal?" she abruptly changed the subject. He saw the point.

They talked about flowers and the stars, the ones that were ruby, sapphire, emerald, orange and white. The gale steadily increased out of the north, whispering darkly over the undulating plateau. They shivered, after a time, a bit chilled, so they walked along, shouldering the hurtling sand lifted by the gouging blasts, she strolling sheltered in his lee. When she mentioned the physical fact, he replied gravely that this was nothing compared to the protection given his spirit by her own. She laughed at the aptness of his retort, but divined the truth in what he said.

The stars had swung far when they returned out of the open into the eastern ward of Racklack. Standing for a time at the picket fence, she was bountiful to him. She lifted her lips, and he trembled at his audacity in supposing she could possibly mean her upturned face as a challenge in the last moment of their parting. Slowly he leaned, doubtful, ready to drop on his knees in abject beseeching if he were mistaken. She did not flinch, but returned his kiss. She made no comment. She backed away, turning with sprightly step; she *meant* it!

He walked on his toes, but incautiously. He swaggered. He wanted to whoop. The wind was his breath, the stars his lights, and the universe served this night as his promenade, and the Milky Way was too short a stroll for him to enjoy the exuberance and jubilation in his soul.

All else in the world was forgotten but the fragrance he had caught with his nostrils, the trembling thrill in his lips, the echoing of a sweet voice in his ears—the sweetheart's eyes in their own brilliance and that face illumined by the glow of the skies were pictured for all time on his memory.

Wise cowboy to enjoy while he could! Prodigal adventurer, careless fugitive! He knew a man could not be too happy. What if as he stepped away down the street behind him, dogging his footsteps, came a slinking, furtive, darting shadow?

Chapter X

HARD FEELINGS

THE feverish excitement in Racklack had led to later hours and larger crowds in the Red Lode. Wickley, the proprietor, who maintained the old traditions of immobile countenance, slow motions and silence with extreme watchfulness, went restlessly up and down from end to end of his all-in-one establishment. People who had known him twenty-five years declared he had not changed, except for the gray over his ears and slightly deeper wrinkles in his sharp, smooth and rather handsome countenance.

Tourists came through the town now in automobiles, instead of in prairie schooners hauled by famished beasts. And despite the grimness of the land, the appearance of the streets, and the weatherbeaten aspects, the wonderful school building so proudly flaunted where its castlelike proportions were visible more than seventy miles, and whose windows reflected the sunrise and sunset more than a hundred miles, was evidence of the substantial financial basis of the country. Mighty few of the cattlemen paid any income taxes, but the county met its obligations on bonds when necessary.

And here in this side hill town, with its many abandoned houses—memory of sundry booms in the past—the strident music of the dance hall was a weird melody on the whispering night wind

from across the deserts. The corrugated metal roofs whimpered and whined in the passing gusts. Everyone pulled down the window curtains, and the storekeepers put up their shutters at night. Surely, it was a plumb peaceable town, but at the same time there was no need of being careless, at that. No doubt the down east yeggmen had come to disturb the serene composure of a community which hadn't had any what might be called real excitement in a long while.

And those plaguey, Eastern burglars had stewed up and started boiling some long dormant antagonisms. But for them positively the community of Racklack would have gone on its soothed and comforting business minding for years and years. Now lots of men were wearing coats who honestly hadn't ever intended to buckle on their belts again, the bulges over the hips declaring the fact that no one could tell what might happen at any time.

The city marshal was right careful how he strolled along the street. He stopped under every electric light, took care to pause a moment in every broad beam from open pool room and drug-store. Now, of course, he didn't mean anything by it. At the same time, there was something friendly and honorable, the way he reassured everyone by the openness of his conduct, that his intentions were merely to be somewhere around, if anything untoward should happen—as for example, parking a car headed the wrong way on the street, or some tourist in too great a hurry passing through town, thus jeopardizing the property and lives of a sedate and civilized community.

But the Red Lode was livelier now than in years. It had been just recently that half a dozen cowboys from some outlying ranch and a few miners from over to the south would make a lot of noise before the long, beautiful soft drink bar. Now five times as many created less real disturbance. People came there to be sociable, of course. The thing remotest from everybody's mind was the possibility that untoward events might break. Yet politeness was meticulously observed.

Deputy Sheriff Dales was dancing with Stepping Lida, who had returned to Racklack, partly for sake of Auld Lang Syne, and partly because she was needed. She was very popular, now, though she never had been sneezed at, in a manner of speaking.

John Payton, lately not so conspicuous around, saw Stepping Lida over a man's shoulder. He had not glimpsed her since her return the day before. For an instant he hesitated, then he jazzed to meet her over the other's arm.

"I'll take her!" Payton said easily, as he cut in, and surprised Dales to the extent of making the deputy stumble rather awkwardly over his own not inconsiderable feet.

On the instant a hush fell across the dance hall floor. Dales had been sensitive about the calling down administered at the tongue and eyes of old Hank Payton, and, anyway, only the best of friends would venture in these tense nights at the Red Lode, to steal another man's girl. Payton had dislodged Stepping Lida from an embrace under exceedingly delicate circumstances, and less than half a rapid bar of music later Dales had recovered his balance, stepped across and as Payton's face came around with its chin on the bare and beautiful shoulder of the young woman, the deputy's fist with a six foot start came swiftly into violent contact with the rather rotund and complacent countenance.

Payton did not know he was going to be hit. Such a thing had not happened to him since his school days, when rude youths occasionally necessitated visits to teachers by the father on account of Jack's troubles. He perhaps did not know what hit him, though close observers claimed to have seen his eyebrows lifting as the fist came plunging home. The banker's son was removed limply from Stepping Lida's arms, and, still riding to the music, Dales resumed his place with perfect aplomb.

Payton was deftly picked up and carried to the hospital which Wickley maintained, one of the girls being a practical nurse who was an expert in wounds, inebriety and digestion troubles. The blow had badly jarred the young man, and his soft flesh had been blistered and puffed by the violence of his facial contact with Dales' fist. Wickley gritted his teeth at the maladroit incident. He knew well enough that the crowd enjoyed a little excitement; at the same time here was Sheriff Hotchkiss on the one hand, then Dales, with the trouble

finding only son of the foremost citizen of the country in a third corner. Who could guess what might develop under the circumstances?

Mr. Darbey Condey, chairman of the Board of Trade, immediately left his table to find Rip Van Wayne of the *Puncher* to demand that the latter absolutely refrain from any least mention or hint about this untoward event in the news columns.

"If you do say a word," Condey declared, "you'll lose every business man's advertising."

"Half a column of live news is worth more than two pages of advertising," Van Wayne declared angrily. "Last week you took two sticks full, and you've all been cutting down on me, the past year. I got something now to fill up on."

Condey blinked. "But, man!" he choked. "You ain't really going to print this mere fist fight! What'll people think?"

"I don't owe the bank a thing, or any of you," Van Wayne grinned, and stood on a chair to see who else was present on this auspicious occasion.

PAYTON, with loosened teeth and a badly swollen face, went home. He had made no comments. When he was over his knockout and out of his daze, he gave no sign as the young woman, Alice, worked over the bruised area endeavoring with sundry ointments to keep the circulation open and thus prevent overmuch discoloration. He set his jaws and did not cringe under the treatment. The girl noticed this, mentioning it to Wickley after Payton had gone home.

"He didn't feel it, you mean?" Wickley asked.

"No, the pain was there, but he set his teeth against it," she explained. "He's pretty soft, but he has grit."

"I'm glad to know about that, Alice," the proprietor said thoughtfully. "They've been riding him pretty hard. He's been the goat. Um-m. His mad lies deep, but probably it's being uncovered. You'd think it would."

Wickley strolled through to look over the waxed floor. As he passed out of the gallery supports into the big two story opening, Stepping Lida walked into his arms, with such a knowing look in her eyes that he circled the hall with her, once and a half around; and then she strolled with him down the line of the curtained stalls at the north end, and into one of these. Sitting at a table was a man in a corduroy suit, his hat down over his eyes and wearing a tawny mustache and Custer goatee. Wickley gave Stepping Lida a glance of inquiry.

"Make you 'quainted with our old friend, So Boss Parkey!" she smiled, pushing Wickley into the seat across the table from the visitor, while she returned tactfully to the music and the dancing, walking on her toes. Life had not yet taken the spring from her muscles or the careless jubilance from her spirits.

CHAPTER XI

LENA PLACK, DEPUTY SHERIFF

WHEN Lena Plack left So Boss Parkey at the front steps of Mrs. Clevelax's boarding-house, she closed the door behind her. She knew the reason the fugitive had come to Racklack. Trust a woman to understand what is in a man's heart! The cowboy had dared imprisonment, even hanging because his soul was in the keeping of the school superintendent. He had confessed to her that he had all the bank loot. If he was criminal he was like many crooks, at the mercy of a woman.

She was exultant in sudden realization of the wishes she had harbored so long, waiting so patiently to gratify them. Sleep, in those circumstances, would be difficult. She felt obliged to learn more of what was going on. Peering out the door again, she saw that the street was deserted. She went down to the walk, and saw emerging from a shadow the figure of a man who darted silently in chase of the man who just had left her.

"Why, they know he's here!" she gasped, frightened by realization. "They'll catch him!" She followed the shadowing man at top speed, with the silence of a light footed girl. With no faintest idea of what she had in mind to do, she made prompt and effective pursuit. The shadow, probably a detective, was only a few score feet behind his quarry. He darted along from gloom to gloom, so wrapt in his own work that he did not discover the anxious figure who followed him.

When So Boss Parkey crossed the

street to skirt the edge of the bare, open plaza of the city, where tourists camped, the shadow was pocketed by lights. No matter in which direction he went, he would be clearly revealed. As he started to go across the open space in plain view, Lena with a sudden inspiration uttered a sharp, nervous yip, the unmistakable alarm cry of a surprised coyote. On the instant she saw the face of the fugitive as he turned his head to look; and the shadow stooped at that same moment as though to hide. On the instant Parkey sidestepped to the right and vanished between two buildings. The alarm had been heard, the danger seen, and the quarry was in flight.

The pursuer ran to the dark alley, but did not enter. Either he knew the pursuit would be in vain, or he was afraid. After looking into the place, he ran out and down the street to the big barracklike Red Lode.

For a minute she stood numb. Within the hour every roadway, every exit from the town would be picketed. Guards with rifles would be put out to encircle the town, and then the whole of Racklack would be searched.

"Oh, if he'll only go for my car!" she choked, turning to rush with her keys to the garage. But in Wishbone Alley she suddenly saw from her own shadow the coming of a darting, stooping, furtive man. A ray of light revealed the corduroy suit, the pale gray hat—Parkey! And in the instant of her surprise, he slipped through a doorway into Wickley's establishment. When she ran to overtake him, she looked in upon the cowboy holding Stepping Lida by the arm and whispering in her ear. Then he slipped into a cubby out of the hallway, while the girl ran through into the dance hall. Stunned, the watcher waited.

Sure enough, Wickley almost immediately came and followed So Boss into the questionable little room. Thus was confirmed even to Lena Plack's reluctant mind the rumoring innuendos that the dance hall keeper stood in with the birds of passage; and that if he told what he knew the robbery of the bank would not be in some of its aspects quite so mysterious.

The young woman backed out and then furtively made her way homeward. She followed along the dark and narrow Wishbone Alley and turned up to the main street where the north side line of buildings ended, crossing to the south side between street light glows, unconsciously going to her garage which was around the corner from the boarding-house, and on the south road which led over the foot of the butte that marked Racklack to the skyline. She had not hurried. She was thinking only of her faith in a badman, a fugitive. She leaned against the garage door in the midnight darkness.

And within ten seconds as she stood dejected, a voice whispered, "How can I thank you, Miss Plack!"

"You saw Wickley." She accused him.

"He's a friend of every crook," Parkey replied. "Nobody in trouble ever asked him a reasonable favor he didn't grant. I told him I wanted Payton cleared on that robbery proposition. He knew the bandits framed it so Jack would be away—look as though he was in it. He said all right. But I'd better be moving now."

Without a word she unlocked the garage, unlocked the car and backed it out quietly. She drove it two or three hundred yards back up the grade to the southward, and turned the wheel over to him. Then she ran back, clipped the lock shut and with a clawbar twisted off the staple to make the disappearance of the car plausible. She noiselessly entered the house, undressed and went to bed, quite ready to retire from the scenes of her adventures. She was very tired, what with her nervous tension and her running up and down, so she went to sleep very quickly.

In the morning when she came down to breakfast Mrs. Clevelax was full of the news. So Boss Parkey had been seen in town; the sheriff had posted deputies all around town, and a systematic search was being made from house to house. They had already found, down in the old bottling establishment, where he left his cowboy clothes to put on a brown corduroy suit.

"And they say he came right down past this house, too," the widow declared, "and the sheriff asked me if he'd been here, but of course I told him no. It was so funny, too. He asked if you had gone out, but I told him I saw you go upstairs a little after eight o'clock, and I was sure you hadn't gone out but

read a while then went to bed. Of course, he knows you knew him, but aren't men perfectly ridiculous thinking you'd have anything to do with a murderer and bank robber!"

"Aren't they?" Lena exclaimed, adding, "I wonder where they think I spend my evenings anyhow?"

"Well, that's what I say!" the widow snapped. "Why, just asking questions like that might almost ruin a woman's reputation. The idea!"

Not till just before school was dismissed in the afternoon did the ransackers of Racklack discover at last that the garage belonging to the school superintendent had been broken open, the staple twisted off, lock and all, tearing the hasp out by the roots, and the pretty roadster stolen.

The sheriff notified her by telephone. "Doggone!" Hotchkiss exclaimed. "Why, we might have known last night how that scoundrel was playing the game. Course, he went up there to see if he could get a whack at your car—and while we've been hunting high and low, he's been pulling his freight; probably he's three-four hundred miles away."

"Of course, you notified everybody to look out for him?" she inquired.

"I don't believe we telephoned a word anywhere," the sheriff confessed. "Why, I don't know what we was thinking about."

"Oh, I do," she chuckled. "You were just plumb sure you had him all sewed up in a bag, and, plague take it, you'd just sewed yourselves inside by mistake. Wasn't that it?"

"Yeh, now laugh," he grumbled. "I wish sometime we men could do something you wouldn't have a right to laugh at; that's what I wish."

"It'd be just as easy as could be," she assured him.

"Theh you go!" he cried. "How about that car?"

"Well, really, you might ask around if anybody knows anything about it," she suggested. "In that way you might find a trace of this fly-by-night person."

"Shu-u!" he exclaimed, chuckling, too. "All right; probably next time they'll be putting in a woman sheriff—one with some sense."

"Oh no, Sheriff, not at all. But really, you might have a woman for under sheriff to supply the department with sense, you know."

"Well, all right. I appoint you deputy sheriff, constitutional adviser to Racklack County shrievalty; I mean it, too!" he declared over the wire. "I'm going to write out a commission, this afternoon, and send you a badge; you're so plaguey smart. Then next time you see something that needs doing, you can hop to it, yourself."

"Oh say, Sheriff!"

"That's all right; I mean it," Hotchkiss declared heartily. "You are deputy sheriff, now, with all the powers and duties of the sheriff, deputized to you, same as to me and all the public officials. I've heard a lot about this woman efficiency in public office. Now we'll see."

Twenty minutes later Under Sheriff Dales came up to the high school, and brought in a badge, which in his grandest style he duly pinned on the young woman's bosom, and handed her a formal parchment: "I do hereby appoint, etc."

"Sheriff'd come himself, but he's busy telephoning," Dales grinned.

Lena Plack didn't laugh. She didn't even smile. She stared at the deputy sheriff who very quickly dropped his gaze and stopped his grinning.

"What's this I hear about you and Payton?" she asked.

Dales replied, "I don't have to take everything from anybody. Course, I'm no fool."

"Aren't you?" she demanded, tartly. "You know the way things are with Payton and Jack. You know the boy's in Dutch at home. Then you let go your fist at the boy—over Stepping Lida! I didn't mean that. She's worth fighting over; any woman is, if you feel that way about it. At the same time, everybody's riding Jack, now. His father, you, and the city gossips. He'll be desperate. His father never gave him a chance. Kicking him out may loosen a wild bad temper, old Hank's own in a lawless mood."

"I can take care of myself. And I'll see to him, too." This darkly.

"You've just appointed me deputy sheriff. Now you behave yourself, Dales," she ordered angrily. "If I'm a deputy sheriff, I'll *be* one!"

"Yes you will!" he taunted her.

"Just what do you mean, Dales?"

"Don't think you've got me buffaloed

any longer," he glared at her. "I was on my way up here when I saw you and that corduroy gent going to take a walk. Course, I'm a gentleman. I didn't butt in. That ain't my style."

"No? Not about me. You just thought enough of Stepping Lida——"

"I get you!" he laughed, only partly in bad temper. "Course, you'll have me in wrong, anyhow. I know I can't talk to you. At the same time, if you do tie my tongue into double bowknots—for I think a heap of you, Miss Plack—I don't believe you are on the level any more'n the rest of us."

He turned on his heel and took his departure.

School was out. The day's work was done. Everyone had heard of her being made deputy sheriff, apparently. They all called to her, "Hello, Deputy!" when she went down after her mail. Sheriff Hotchkiss, seeing her, came across the street to shake her hand.

"Come here!" he beckoned her, and guided her into the big hardware store.

"Mr. Worden!" he called the proprietor, "introduce you to Miss Deputy Sheriff Lena Plack. Now fit the lady out with the best doggone six-gun, the fastest holster and the best embossed belt you got."

"Sheriff!" She turned to him, pleading. "Now you——"

"You got to do it. Under the constitution and State laws, I got a right to call on yo', on anybody, in the name of the flat, to uphold the law, and I'm doing it. No, Worden; not the big .45. That's too heavy; the kick's too strong. Make it a .32 center fire twenty grain shell. Give the lady a thousand shots, too. Say, that's as pretty a gun as I ever saw! Don't it balance pretty? That's a dandy. Now, Miss Plack, I'll send up the rest of the shells; but now we'll fill this belt. Doggone, Worden, this'n's got to have the slack took up some. Gimme that hole punch."

When he had fixed the buckle straps to suit him, he buckled the belt around the waist of the young woman, and the outflaring fast draw Cheyenne holster dangled over her hip. She stood, blushing and gritting her teeth, and turned to face the sheriff. "All right, Sheriff; if you'll have it so, I'll serve!"

"You bet you will," he declared, heartily. "If you don't I'll sure have you up before the county court, charged with neglect of duty. That means—um-m——"

"It means I've talked too much," she finished. "I've had some firearm practice; now I'll see what I can do with this!"

And half an hour later listeners on the street could hear the bark of a .32 caliber blued barrel revolver out in the open beyond the Widow Clevelax's boarding-house. They counted eighteen shots, grinning. In the morning, somebody heard eighteen more shots, three loads. The new deputy sheriff was good as her word. She was practicing with a gun, in case she should need it in the high and honorable profession of deputy sheriff—even though her job had come to her willy-nilly.

She already could shoot straight. She grew fast on the draw, too. She needed only to become accustomed to this particular caliber, weight and type of sidearm. And she wore the weapon, as ordered by the sheriff, even when she was at her duties in the high school. Her previous practice helped her now.

Two days later, on Friday afternoon, the superintendent's telephone rang in the school office, and when Miss Plack listened in, answering, Sheriff Hotchkiss spoke in his most official manner, "This you, Deputy Plack?"

"Yes indeed, Sheriff!"

"All right; there's some stolen property over south at the Fur Trap brand ranch. Under Sheriff Dales and you're to go down soon's you can and bring it to Racklack."

"Why—it's a hundred miles——"

"Go tomorrow; that's Saturday. The road's pretty bad, out from the main trail. Mrs. Real says she can take care of you. Dales will come after you about eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Very well, Sheriff," she replied meekly, hanging up.

The sheriff saw her come down after her mail a little later. He crossed from his office to greet her. He took her across to the big building and at his desk, explained himself.

"You know what I want," he said. "Dales isn't saying anything. But Jack Payton has talked just enough to show he's sure desperate. You see, everybody kind of despises old Hank's boy. Hank himself has all of a sudden had his doubts. I'm keeping Dales away from Payton till both cool off. I'm kind

of in hopes you can make Dales reasonable. You can see what a hole we'd all be in, if those two boys run foul."

"They might shoot now," she suggested.

"Exactly; Jack Payton's been seen practicing with his pistol as much as you have. You're probably the only one who can do anything, if there's any way of heading off trouble."

"I see, Sheriff," she replied. "Naturally, sending me on this trip——"

"Nobody'll say anything; nobody'll think anything," he declared. "The fact is, everybody understands just what I'm trying to do—keep peace."

"I'll do what I can," she promised.

All the long ride southward across the desert plateau she argued with Dales.

"Old Hank abused me," the under sheriff declared. "I don't take anything more either from him or from his boy. I don't have to. What they start I'm going to finish. Suppose you try coaxing old Hank or John Payton for a change. Of course, I understand perfectly why Hotchkiss sent you and me down here to get your car——"

"My car!"

"Sure. So Boss left it at the Fur Trap ranch. Didn't you know it?"

"I didn't know that," she said. "He just said we should bring back some stolen property."

"Why I thought—" He didn't complete his sentence. Presently he said, wonderingly, "Then you just came down here on my account?"

"I won't deceive you, Dales," she answered. "A deputy sheriff is supposed to obey his chief's orders. I didn't want to be appointed. I didn't want to come. But I couldn't refuse to perform a duty. I don't believe there's a bandit, a gunman in the country, you wouldn't go up against, as a matter of duty. You might possibly realize that doing things is no more important than not doing, say, a killing in the grudge of personal enmity."

"Well, all right," Dales declared, "I see the idea. It's their move, anyhow. I won't forget. If there's a fight you'll know I didn't start it. And if—well, you'll do your duty if they get me?"

"I surely shall!" she promised.

"That's all I ask," Dales commented. "I reckon you're the squarest public official I ever did get to see. You'll make them face the music."

They found Lena's car at the Fur Trap brand ranch, and Mrs. Real said So Boss Parkey had left it there for Miss Plack.

"He left a letter for you, too," she added, and handed her an envelope.

Dales watched her. She opened and read:

Dear Miss Plack:

I didn't have time to thank you for this car, and the way things are I don't know if ever I will have. But I'm a thousand times obliged.

Yours,

Parkey.

She handed the letter to the under sheriff, who read it. He smiled as he returned the sheet. She did not dodge the issue.

"You know, of course, he's covering me," she said. "I want you to know I was dead wrong; but I'd do the same thing over again, under the same circumstances. If I saw him now I'd give him fair warning. I couldn't double-cross him, you know. Not even for sake of the law could I trick him. I am human, Dales. I think, honest, I'd rather be a good girl than a good sheriff; but I find I'm in a pretty bad mess, trying to be both."

"You think a lot of Parkey, don't you?"

She nodded, quite unable to speak in reply. He saw in the flutter of her eyes that tears were close to the surface.

CHAPTER XII

PACKING GUNS

JOHN PAYTON kept out of the way of his father, only to meet him face to face at the big house garage. John's face was swelled from under the lower jaw up to his right eye, where Dales' fist had landed so unexpectedly over Stepping Lida's shoulder. The old man stared at the distorted and discolored cheek. He started to speak but clicked his teeth to go on past. At the same time he could not restrain, if he even tried to, the expression of disgust. As though he had spoken, John knew his father's contempt.

From that hour John began to practice with his revolvers and automatics, especially from the hip, elbow and full arm, three fast shots at a throw. Driv-

ing out into the alkali and sage he fired hundreds of shots. When he met even his friends he gave but the slightest signs of recognition. The community feeling settled down into the grim expectancy which in the gun country precedes the steady, irresistible growth of anger and deadly purpose.

No one knew what to do. The sheriff had put the clamp down on Under Sheriff Dales, who did not relax his vigilance, but whose word was good, when he gave it to Deputy Sheriff Lena Plack. No one else could have obtained his promise, but he repeated it to his chief.

"I don't owe either of the Paytons anything, now," Dales declared. "I'm not looking for trouble. If I have half a chance I'll sidestep it. I'm peaceable. But nobody is going to ride me any more, not old Hank, particularly, or his pup."

Not in years had old Payton carried a gun, except when he went off across country, when he tucked a 38-40 into the side pocket of his car or carried a rifle across his saddle or in a boot. Old Hank now strapped on a pair of big guns which he had worn habitually twenty years before.

And yet when Dales met old Hank they passed without seeing each other. It was noticed that Hank's head turned as he went by, watching over his shoulder for any overt action of Dales'. But Dales proudly looked straight ahead, a compliment that presently brought a flush of shame to the old man's face. The under sheriff knew that whatever happened, old Hank would not shoot anyone in the back, but would fight fair.

John Payton did not often come uptown. When he did he usually drove along Wishbone Alley to the hardware store, buying prodigal quantities of ammunition, or going into poolrooms to buy makings or machine rolled cigarettes. His furtive watchfulness was ominous.

It seemed as though Racklack never had endured quite such suspense. The last of the autumnal cattle drives for shipment were made. The sharp wintry gale of wind swept with stinging insistence across the bleak plateau levels. The vari-colored stones of the Waning Glories were beautiful in the sunshine. The sky itself was crystalline blue, so clear that the stars hung like sparkling stones in all colors at night, royal gems.

The tourist traffic nearly ceased. The grim winter season settled down in cold relentlessness, as bright as ice. The ranchers and riders who came to town wore thick sheepskin coats, heavy chaps, and tremendous mittens.

Sheriff Hotchkiss sent Dales on long distance errands, so he would be away two or three days at a time. A hundred times attempts were made to intervene with John Payton. Always in the past he had let people understand he would do what was asked of him. He now pretended to assent, to be peaceable, not to start anything himself. But the ophidian blankness in his eyes was deadly. He was as dangerous as the silent reptiles of the wilderness, all poison and no warning.

Sheriff Hotchkiss had bound Under Sheriff Dales by a promise the young man would keep, unquestionably. But now Hotchkiss came to him and said, "You know, Dales, if anything starts it's the man who gets there first that counts?"

"Yes, I know, Sheriff," Dales assented quietly. "Course, I'm not going to start first. I gave my word as to that."

The sheriff extended his hand to the man who never knew what moment his hour would come. One other supremely important person gave him a word, too. Deputy Sheriff Lena Plack telephoned to Dales one Friday morning from high school, asking him to come up at once. When he arrived, she was alone in her office.

"Sit down," she invited him. "All I wanted to tell you was this. Two of the girls told me this morning that John Payton came along Wishbone Alley last night, and went through to the main street at every garage driveway and wherever there was a runway between buildings. They happened to see him, when making a cross cut from the motion picture theater, homeward bound."

"He was doing that?" Dales asked. "You expect old Hank's boy'll bushwhack a man—shoot from cover and in the back?"

"I'm telling you what those girls saw, Dales," she replied. "You made me a promise. The more I think of it, the more pleasure, the more pride I feel to think you'd do it. The way I feel now—well, I'd release you from it. I told Hotchkiss."

"Well, Lena," Dales sighed. "I

don't ask for release, and I don't want to be released. What I said goes. In a split second, you know, I may be let loose. If I'm shot in the back, all right. You'll know I'd rather be shot than ambush a man, myself. I like to think that you'll believe I never took advantage of any man, not of crook or desperado, and that living or dying I played my cards as they came and was always straight."

"I know, dear man," she exclaimed. "I hate to think—I want you to know I've yet to hear anyone or of anyone who doesn't wish you the best of luck!"

He nodded, shook her hand and without another word went his way with proud step and the consciousness that he was a good man and a true officer. Yet watching him stroll down the steep slope of the school grounds, tears stole down the cheeks of Lena Plack. He had pinned on her bosom the badge of deputy sheriff. He had delivered to her the formal paper of appointment. He was indeed her brother officer. She had promised him to do *her* duty. How much it had meant to him to listen to her little preachments she now fully realized. It made her proud, watching him go down into the bright, sunny, bitter cold of Racklack's street, prepared in his soul to follow the rules no matter what his treacherous enemy should do.

For weeks Racklack had lived and performed its daily round, under this increasing strain of apprehension. Today was like many previous days, except it was colder, rawer and brighter, fairly blinding. And for hours during that day the pupils in the big Racklack school were restless. Without warning, without cause, they broke into panics of excitement and hysterias of giggling. What ailed them no one knew. Time and again Lena Plack was summoned to read the riot act to this or that class. Instantly upon her entering a room, sweeping the grinning or excited faces with her cool, hard eyed gaze, quiet was restored. Usually in such affairs, she would have it out with the youngsters in a give or take of sarcasm, excuse and explanation. Now her iron discipline settled down without comment or resistance.

She drove downtown after her mail, which had come in just before noon. Usually, she waited till late, after school. Now for the first time on a school day in two or three weeks she went to the post office in the short mid-day recess.

Darting swiftly up to the post office, nearly opposite the county court and the sheriff's office in the jail, she ran to her box, which she opened by the combination. She emerged into the street again shuffling several envelopes, one of which had handwriting that made her stare. She slit the cover, and sure enough, it was from So Boss Parkey.

Her cheeks colored, turning pale instantly. Didn't he know she was now deputy sheriff? He knew, well enough:

Dear Deputy Sheriff:

She looked up from the sheet to see Under Sheriff Dales coming down from the jail office, looking back as he said something to Hotchkiss who had followed him to the doorway. Uneasily she glanced eastward along the street. Old Hank Payton was just coming out of the hardware store as Dales started across the street toward the post office. She turned to the right and looked involuntarily along the street toward the west, stepping quickly to the curb with one foot on the car running board which was practically level with the sidewalk.

She saw on the instant a hand with a silver barreled revolver come from the runway between the pool room and the clothing store next west of the post office. The gun was low; above and behind it John Payton sprang into view behind a big drink list sign of the pool room. She threw up her right hand as she looked at Dales. The under sheriff was quickening his step, looking at her. He was in mid-street. He saw and caught the significance of her quick motion.

John Payton, with both hands on his two guns aimed from the elbow, had sprung clear. He had schemed it well. This was broad, bright day. He had only to emerge from his ambush, step into the full open and shoot down his man. He could then plead self-defence and fair play—and who would dare testify to the contrary against a Payton?

He did his job nervously. Pulling both triggers he fired his weapons nearly simultaneously, as Dales went for and got his own .45-standard. And both of Payton's bullets struck, driving Dales back half a step. Hard hit, neverthe-

less, Dales clenched his jaws, dragged out his gun and with three shots, one from the hip, one from the elbow, the third from the shoulder, threw the wretched ambusher back step by step. Payton staggered and fell dead, not knowing whether or not he had done the killing he had undertaken.

For a moment Dales stood swaying, looking again at Lena Plack. What he saw made him smile across his pale face, taking the bitterness from his terrible eyes. From the eastward also a shot had come. Old Hank Payton when the firing began had reached for his own gun, but his coat was buttoned over the holster. He ripped off the buttons and pulled his revolver, not shooting till he leveled it with his eye. The shot cut a crease a foot long across Dale's back, and the under sheriff sank to his knees, bracing his arms, still looking at Lena.

Lena had drawn her own gun with a long, sweeping draw to shoot as a law officer sometimes must. And, as a good policeman ought always to do, she shot with beautiful accuracy. The slim .32 caliber revolver bullets went into the point of old Hank's shoulder, three of them, one after the other smashing the ball and socket joint against all repairing. His big .45 fell to the ground and as one of the slender bullets drove on through, it chipped the nub of one of a spinal column bones and the big fellow fell, paralyzed. The deputy had not shot to kill—just merely to force fair play.

Deputy Sheriff Lena Plack turned, gave Dales a frightened glance like a bird, and fell in a faint. But Dales before he died knew she had shot it out for him. His face dropped in the dust, for one of John Payton's bullets had nicked the aorta above his heart, killing him.

The tension in Racklack broke. It had happened. The tragedy was over, and everyone ran to Lena Plack and Dales. For the moment, the populace didn't care a whoop what had happened to the Paytons. She was carried to the drugstore, excited voices inquiring if she had been hit. If she had been, old Hank Payton probably would have been hanged on the corner by his own bank. But cool observers, especially Sheriff Hotchkiss, had noted that no shot had been fired in her direction. The community was saved the disgrace of having seen its lady deputy sheriff wounded in a gunfight.

"It's all right, boys!" the sheriff declared huskily. "She's just naturally fainted."

Dales was carried over to the jail to be laid on two old planks which had in past years served the same purpose on other grim occasions. Somebody noticed that old Payton was still alive. He was carried to the drugstore, too. Knowing how she would feel about it, when the aromatic spirits of ammonia had done their work, a kindly screen hid from her view the terrific results of her straight shooting.

"Dales—how's Dales?" she inquired as soon as she had recovered.

The silence was unmistakable. About the others she did not ask. She looked at her wrist watch. It was only 12:15 o'clock. With a shake of her head she sat up, with her feet over the edge of the soda fountain counter on which she had been laid. Across the aisle and back on the Christmas Goods counter she saw the big upturned shoes of big Hank. She colored, then whitened again.

"Is he dead?" she asked Hotchkiss.

"Oh no; just stunned," the sheriff declared.

"He's my prisoner—charge of attempted murder," she said, sharply. "You understand that, Sheriff?"

"What?" Hotchkiss exclaimed. "Why he——"

"John Payton drew on Dales, and so did Henry Payton. It was deliberate murder," she declared; and instantly the crowd within and those standing outside who all heard her sharp, clear statement, broke into wild yells of approval.

"Why—course! That's all right," the sheriff assented; and then the wounded man was taken to the cottage hospital down the street, and was entered on the books as a prisoner. The body of John Payton was carried in a grocery truck to the Niles & Regent mortuary.

Sheriff Hotchkiss drove Deputy Sheriff Lena Plack to her boarding-house in her car. He helped her as she walked into the building where Mrs. Clevelax, who had already heard the news from one of her excited patrons, assisted the young woman to the parlor lounge.

"I'm afraid I'm not much good, Sheriff!" the girl sighed, smiling wanly.

"Not much good?" he exclaimed. "Why—well—if you'll just excuse me."

He unpinned the deputy sheriff badge from her waist. He showed her another badge.

"It's the one Dales wore," Hotchkiss explained. "It was given him when we promoted him to be under sheriff the time he rounded up the cattle rustlers away down below the Fur Trap brand ranch. I just know he'd a sight rather you'd wear it, be the new under sheriff, than anyone else."

"Oh, Sheriff," she choked, "I don't want to be an officer any more. Oh—I can't! I mustn't! Don't you see?"

She broke into tears which relieved her, while they embarrassed but did not weaken the big and burly chief of the Racklack police forces.

"Nope. Can't get along without you," he assured her, gruffly. "Need somebody with lots of common sense—and nerve! Got to have 'em in the shrievalty, you know. Besides, women have got the vote."

"But I've got two jobs," she made a last argument.

"Reckon you could manage a dozen of 'em!" he laughed. "You're a bargain in all the jobs you'll hold."

He took his departure. The boarding-house mistress brought in a cup of strong coffee, and then waited hopefully for the direct news of the day, but until Editor Rip Van Wayne arrived for an interview she was compelled to wait. Then quietly enough, staring at the floor, Under Sheriff Lena Plack gave a terse story of what happened.

"That's the way I saw it," she said.

"Then you arrested old Hank, they say?" Van Wayne asked.

"I did—for murder," she declared.

"Good!" he chuckled. "Now you've got the old scoundrel where you want him!"

"Where *I* want him?" she asked wonderingly. "You mean the courts!"

"Shucks," he grinned, "you're all right, believe me!"

When he took his departure she called up the school. "How is everything?" she asked her assistant.

"Fine. The children are as quiet as kittens," came the answer.

The young woman hung up. She drew a crumpled envelope from her pocket and caressed it.

Chapter XIII

THE UNWILLING OFFICER

LENA PLACK went downtown the following morning, going directly to Sheriff Hotchkiss. "I resign!" she declared. "Oh, I must!"

"Tell me about it," he answered, with unexpected kindness.

She dropped her head on her arms on his desk, weeping. He waited patiently, withal a little grimly. "I can't go on, Sheriff!" she sobbed. "Don't you see—I'm——"

"Can't do your duty, girl? What do you mean?"

"Sheriff," she turned on him, "don't you see? There's the school, and—and it's too hard for a woman."

"Eh—oh—um!" he ejaculated. "Why, you mean——?"

"I mean you've carried the joke or punishment or whatever it is you had in mind, far enough."

"Well, I really don't see just how I can—" the sheriff began.

She flashed one glance at him, and he wilted. Silently Lena Plack unpinned the badge she had been honored to wear. She handed it with the gun to the sheriff who could only accept it. Her resignation was, of course, the only possible course in the circumstances. At the same time, Hotchkiss was sorry. There had been attractive possibilities in having the young woman as an officer of the law.

"Probably this is the best way out," the sheriff remarked.

"Oh, I hope so!" she declared.

HE SAW when she rolled away that she turned her back squarely on the Sweetwater Springs and the Waning Glories road. Rocking back and forth in his pivoting office chair, he matched the tips of his fingers. The telephone bell rang.

"This is the hospital, Superintendent Clandin," a voice said. "Mr. Payton wants to see you right away."

"I'll be right up."

In less than ten minutes Hotchkiss was sitting beside the bed of the now one armed man. The amputation, the suffering and the bereavement had not tamed the old war horse. His face was filled with the wrath of pride.

"They tell me I'm a prisoner," he declared.

"Yes, Mr. Payton. You sure are!"

"What for?"

"Murder."

"Murder? What? You don't mean shooting that damn' scoundrel Dales when he was trying to kill my boy, is murder?"

"Under Sheriff Dales is dead, shot down by John and you, Mr. Payton," the sheriff explained.

"Well, who arrested me? Who made those charges?"

"Under Sheriff Lena Plack."

"Under Sheriff—I thought——"

"When Dales was dead, I appointed her."

"Well, by thunder! You *un*appoint her, hear me? What do you think you are?"

"I think I'm sheriff of Racklack County, Payton, and I think you're a prisoner on the charge of murder," Hotchkiss replied.

Payton surged in his bed. His face darkened. His eyes showed now where John had inherited his dull, serpentine expression. "I'll be out of this soon's I'm limbered up a bit. What's the bail?"

"There is no bail for this murder, Payton."

"You send the judge to me!"

"He's away on business," Hotchkiss answered, rising and adding, "You know I've always been with you in party matters, Payton. We've worked together a long time. I wish you'd take second thought about some conditions which have come up. You know if John had lived both of you would have faced an open and shut charge of murdering Dales. For weeks, John laid for my under sheriff, to get him—and Dales was as good an officer as the county ever had. We knew but couldn't prove it. Now everybody thinks you and he conspired to do murder."

"But, my Lord, I hadn't spoken to John—" The wounded man's voice choked as he turned away, and then he went on. "I was just—just trying to defend my boy in the shooting, Hotchkiss."

"Defending him while he did cold blooded, premeditated murder from ambush, yes!" the sheriff declared angrily. "You've had your own way a long time here in Racklack, Payton, but you're going to find it——"

"Sheriff!" a sharp, feminine voice interrupted, as the hospital superintendent spoke up. "You ought not to arouse this patient——"

Hotchkiss departed without another word, downtown.

RACKLACK was weary now of the intensity which had endured even following the tragedy. Men who had waited on tiptoe for months were weak in the aftermath of dread which still held over the town. Against the wrath and vengeance of old Payton arose a feeling of protest and hopelessness. He was wealthy and he was boss.

The old fellow was angry. Racklack had waited silently by while his son was shot dead. He wasn't going to stand for that. For years his hard greed of wealth and power had overshadowed the region. It had never been so ominous as now. All that Saturday following the shooting crowds flocked into the town from far and near.

By the time the sunset's last purple glow had faded into the cobalt of starlit night, a whisper had gone through the town. Perhaps it originated in some word over the telephone, or passed on by a nurse or doctor from the hospital.

Van Wayne, the editor, met Hotchkiss on the sheriff's return from his second or third saunter on patrol. "I say, Sheriff," the newspaper man asked, "I hear you broke with Payton?"

"You hear I broke with Payton?" the sheriff asked, unable quite to control the feeling in his voice.

"They say he called you to the hospital, and demanded you turn him loose, and you told him not by a damn' sight."

Sheriff Hotchkiss turned his face squarely to look the editor in the eyes. For a long minute the two gazed thus significantly. "Is that all they said, Van Wayne?" the officer asked at last.

"No, it isn't. Some said you hadn't the nerve; some that you had."

"Well, we always trained together, Payton and I," Hotchkiss suggested.

"I know, but you promoted Lena Plack to under sheriff, on the spot," Van Wayne reminded him. "That after she'd shot it out with the old man, to help her immediate superior, Dales. That doesn't look like you truckled."

"I'll have to tell you she resigned, though," Hotchkiss replied, "and then she rolled out of town."

"Then she hasn't gone to Parkey? Some said she went to arrest him; that you sent her?"

"No. You know she couldn't do that. She was an old friend of his."

"Sure, she used to go to dances with So Boss. The boys thought it was pretty curious, if she went to bring him in."

"Well, she didn't. She's badly broken up by the whole business. I appointed her rather impulsively, you know. She was tart, the way she talked about us politicians. I called her, but she wasn't bluffing. She put Payton under arrest, charging murder. She's still the complaining witness in the case, you see. As head of the shrievalty I've backed her official acts to the limit. She made me see, however, that I wasn't fair to ask her to take care of our schools and do an under sheriff's work, too. She's only a girl, you know, and mighty human. But this didn't relieve me of my duty. Payton is still a prisoner charged with murder. In the circumstances, I'm refusing to allow bail."

"I see, Sheriff!" Van Wayne cried. "Shake, old man! I'm with you!"

The two shook hands, and the sheriff's eyes suddenly glistened. He, too, had faced a terrific dilemma that day. He had seen his duty, to do it. The conflict between power that had put him in office, and the law for which his oath of office stood had been met man fashion, by himself alone. He had told no one of his action. He had withheld information from the public. He had hesitated to tell even his own political intimates. But Van Wayne had forced the issue, on a question of public information. And the newspaper man had recognized the staunchness of the officer.

There came to Hotchkiss two ranchers, Dogtooth Ramsey and Bone-Sight Dangert. They just happened to drift in, sociably, it seemed. They had never figured much in politics. They were good friends of everybody. Usually, they were quite commonplace citizens of the wide open plateau country. They harmed no one, disputed with none whatever, and were thoroughly well let alone.

Even Sheriff Hotchkiss was puzzled by their companionship. They had never been friendly to him, especially. Ramsey had voted for him, and Dangert had voted for his opponent—just ordinary feelings, nothing pointed. But now the two strolled where the officer strolled, drank soda at the Wet-Your-Whistle fountain, and on either side of their companion, stayed with him till their presence was unmistakable. Their holstered guns, with butts outflaring from their four hips were ready. They were unmistakably fair warnings to any and to all that it wouldn't be healthy for any of the Payton following to question the authority of Sheriff Hotchkiss from ambush with bullets.

Chapter XIV

LENA GOES THE OTHER WAY

LENA PLACK drove away from Racklack with misery in her soul. She had never quite realized the insidious envelopment of her heart by the riding mankiller, So Boss Parkey. She had penetrated his disguise of a crude and reckless cowboy, finding that he was really an educated man, one who had fled from the sloth and ease of success to become a hard working laborer of the glorious high plateaus.

She turned her back on him. She turned her back on the little village which was the political and financial heart of the splendid Racklack land. The careless intelligence, the gay tactfulness, the debonair courage of the riding cowboy loomed an anguish in her heart, and she now discovered that she did not know even his first name. She was not sure that she knew his correct inherited name. She was in every way sure that he loved this great country on the same plane that she did.

When dusk, the colorful twilight of the desert came, she pulled out from the road to a low bluff of dark red sandstone rising perpendicularly from the wind leveled plateau. The rock broke the steady northwest gale. She set up her folding cot, spread the heavy waterproofed tarpaulin, laid down the two great Navajo blankets and stretched out on the bunk, wrapping herself wearily in her coverings.

She was more than thirty miles from the nearest ranch. Probably she was as far from any human being. The isolation was a welcome relief from the nagging of circumstances. There is a rare peace in the utter desolation of environment, away from all the exac-

tions of gregarious custom. She was worn out, so that she slept like a child.

In the midnight a coyote ascended the windward side of the ledge and, unaware of her presence, poised on an eminence and lifted his jaws straight up to howl in the gale—his voice a song in the immensity of vast plateau problems, and perhaps a call, a summons, an invocation to the very stars whose twinkling in the skies must have stirred the imagination of far less observant creatures than the hungry bodied, perhaps starved wraiths of the bare and desperate places.

It seemed to Lena Plack, awakened by the weird and undulating yelling as though the beast was somehow transferring her feelings through his wailings into the immensities of the interminable space that enveloped her. And presently the yelping went into a gulp and a choking, followed by a whimpering and she saw the dark figure silhouetted against the deep blue of the illuminated skies, saw his ruby red eyes and his open jaws as he turned his head first to one side then the other looking down to where she was beside her car. The wolf uttered a comical squealing protest, flung himself backward out of sight, and disappeared. She had intruded on the privacy of his vast domain, listened to his most anxious beseechings, and interrupted his finest nuances of feeling. She could only chuckle and sympathize with his dismay and bad temper.

She could not sleep again. Her mind was clear, her heart rested, her emotions leveled to calm. The air was sharply cold on her face, but she was snug in her berth. She could see the smoke of the wind borne sand and through a low place, a V-notch a few feet beyond in the cliff. She could hear the vibrant music of the gale over the edge of the stone on each side of the pinnacle opposite her, where the eddies flocked up into the direct blasts.

At dawn, with its crystalline rose and its lucent pearl along the eastern mountain ranges, she set about preparing breakfast from her grub box, with her gasoline stove, with no thought and no desire to go elsewhere. Her coffee took an unconscionable time to come to full flavor, and boiled away most rapidly; that was all. Happily, she had plenty of water on the running board.

Sitting there, she had to laugh lightly. The impulse to flee into the wilderness had carried her to this place. Just so humanity has always gone into the uninhabitable or abandoned places for refuge from kings and conscience. She could understand the minds of those who go for forty days, or forty years, into such places to refresh their souls and find strength for their hearts. She would not stay that long. She had to be back in school, on Monday morning. At the same time, this all gave her perspective. It would never do for her to run away.

Chapter XV

PARKEY SEES A LIGHT

SO BOSS PARKEY waited at the Sweetwater Spring for Lena Plack to keep rendezvous with him. No place in the world was more beautiful for a lovers' tryst. Below the spring were many lovely desert growths, whose roots channeled moisture into the small but pretty leaves, and blossoms stood bravely in the sunshine, which could be so deadly to the things that grow, but which here merely gave brilliance, a certain gemlike beauty of color as though even the flowers had in them a crystalline quality.

Up from the winding ooze of sinking wet and evaporating moisture the rocks rose in shattered glory, with faces polished smooth by passing sandblasts; and amid the crevices of the precipitous slopes grew a scattering of herbage and even, here and there, elfin trees stunted by the ages into dwarfs enduring constant privations.

Parkey's confidence and buoyancy gave way to doubts and the impatiences of an anxious lover who arrives too soon. His defiance melted in hurt, then wonder and in time dissolved in fear itself.

Something was in the matter, on which Parkey had not at all counted. He was willing to try and ride any beast on four legs, for fun or money. He rather exulted in a fair race with a sheriff's posse. He had come closer to the joy and exhilaration of the hills, the delights of the Waning Glories, the perfect freedom, than ever before as he now lived alone in the wilderness, conscious of the eternal pursuit of death itself. What was a sheriff and his posse, compared to the race man ever runs with

life, though losing inevitably at the last?

But Lena Plack had complicated the philosophies of So Boss Parkey. She had not come to him in answer to his note. He tried to believe it had not been delivered. But not for this did the trail down the valley toward Racklack show no tuft of curling dust raised by her wheels. Instead, he saw only the tawny swirling dance of the passing harpies, the greater sand maidens, the wraiths that rise like scores of spirits and drift ever before the northerly winds in endless procession of those who come of the dust and vanish as falling dust, their short races quickly run.

The jubilant expectation faded from Parkey's lips. His eyes lost their luster. The unlined brow came to wrinkles of worry and hurt. He sat for hours, hands clasped across his shins, hardly shifting his position as he gazed toward far Racklack. The voice of the girl he loved did not need to come vibrant across the bare, beautiful, enchanting land to tell him her dilemma which was going on into bitter disappointment in him. He knew.

Definitely, So Boss Parkey saw the point. The girl, the competent young woman, was proud and whatever her own personal ideas in the matter, it was beneath her dignity to meet a fugitive from justice. She had thought twice about the matter. She had even become a deputy sheriff, herself. Her pride loomed splendid in this novel light of the cowboy's comprehension.

He whistled to his horse. He gave the animal a drink, packed his pony with his outfit, filled his water cans and with a glance around to see if he had left anything at his own camp ground, he headed away in the late day toward Racklack. He could play at illicit adventuring. He could, as far as the people of this country were concerned, enjoy the run of a wolf ahead of the pack. But when confronted by the possibility of a doubt, of even scorn, in the thoughts of the woman he loved—well, it was better to hang unjustly than to have Lena Plack question him with even a faint shadow of right in her own mind. He must abide by the law, even though it was unjustly administered. In the end, whatever happened to the individuals, humanity's only refuge was the accepted swing of the scales of justice.

The way down those miles toward Racklack was long. He followed the two rut trail. The day was passing. The sun neared the peaks and canyons of the Waning Glories. So Boss looked often, for long intervals, toward the resolution of the white glare of full day into the colors of the evening. In the sky mysteriously appeared flickerings and spreadings of clouds, the undulations of long streamers, separated spines; and presently, the clouds at the horizon cast shadows on the orderly formations of the high zenith so that streamers of gold intermingled with bars of purple and checkerings of alternating lilac and silver, deep blue and royal red.

He surely never had seen so brilliant and enchanting a spectacle. He did not feel that he was leaving it. Instead, he knew that vast scene was accompanying him. He could not have witnessed the immensity of the view unless he were out there, miles from the alluvial fans at the mouths of the Waning Glory valleys. To him was vouchsafed the feeling that the high heavens thus approved his determination, and when the last of the sun's rays were reflected in the very highest of the skies, he saw rose pink against the deep cobalt—the flush of color which has but one rival, the heightening hue in a beautiful woman's cheeks.

With his back to the north star, Parkey urged his horses onward. The desert sparkled ahead of him. He saw out across the alkali, night mirages. There away down in an arid salt lake he discovered a city illumined by countless lights. There were flashes of pure gleaming color, as though red, blue and green lamps were carried along the streets. Above it glowed a yellow dome. The desert was dreaming and this was its vision, a city of thronging humanity. And music was not lacking.

He watched his horse to see if the handsome animal made the same discoveries of nonsense, and saw the fine beast licking out its tongue as though pleasant pastures and cool waters were luring it from this long, slightly meandering trail that led into Racklack, which in the blue, star sprinkled gloom, loomed against the cluster of pilot knobs as though it were also a wonder city no more real than the unnamed playa town.

When So Boss discerned the Snake Brand ranch ahead of him, he gave

thought to the animals. Three score miles or more was too much for the beasts. The strain on his own nerves also was needless. Coming to the dark quarters, with the corral, the waterhole, the several low buildings, So Boss hailed, from a distance of fifty yards or so.

A voice replied.

"Howdy," So Boss said. "I'm on my way to Racklack. Wonder could I get you to run me in with an automobile?"

"Who-all mout you be?"

"So Boss Parkey."

"*What!*"

"So Boss Parkey."

"Well, you know, it'd look bad for me, So Boss, if I was to take you in a-raiding—not but what I know how things stand!"

"I'm not going in raiding, Sugar," So Boss replied. "I'm quitting the long-ride. I'm going in to face the music."

"You be, So Boss? Well, by the old Harry, I'm going with you! I've faced the music; it's the only way. Course I'll take yo' in. Hang up yo' saddle. I'm comin'—an' I'll take cyar of yo' hosses, long's yo' wish!"

"Thankee, Sugar. I'm obliged."

"That's all right. Where's them damn' pants! All right, jes' a minute!"

Sugar had been a long-rider. Coming in, he'd risen to the foremanship of this ranch. He might hesitate to accommodate a fugitive, but never in the world to help a man going in to take his medicine. He was out pretty soon in a huge touring car, with the top down. But on a happy thought, he asked if So Boss didn't want a snack? Parkey didn't. He had no appetite, now. He did go to the corral bars, however, to pat the noses of his horses once more. It was significant that they turned from green alfalfa to cross the yard and nuzzle their master.

"When horses leave feed to talk to a man, it's sure a sign," Sugar declared with emphasis.

Something else was full of meaning, too. Sugar usually hit the trail to Racklack at forty-five miles an hour. This night he loafed along at eighteen or twenty miles an hour. Sugar knew how a man feels, riding in to give up. He took his time. He talked of old and other times. Sometimes, of course, as Sugar talked he'd grow enthusiastic and coming to some crisis in a story he'd have the accelerator jammed to the deck; they'd be riding the high places at fifty miles or so. Then a chuck would bring him back to ten or fifteen miles the hour. And toward the last, Sugar stopped talking.

Racklack was still dark. A silvery flush was in the east. The music of the Red Lode was strident through the town, a gusty, lifting gaiety in the fanciful old-time tunes.

"Have a drink?" Sugar asked. "I can prob'ly get one."

"This isn't a drinking proposition," So Boss shook his head. "If you'd just as soon, I want to go straight to Hotchkiss."

"Sure thing."

"No reason why you shouldn't get the reward," So Boss suggested.

"Look-a-heah," Sugar turned to him. "I beg pardon, Sugar! I mis-spoke myself."

"Yes, So Boss, you sure did!"

At the big, two story brick jail, with sheriff's quarters downstairs, the two shook hands. So Boss threw out his saddle bags and a dunnage sack.

"S'long!" Sugar said, softly and rolled in a sharp curve back on his trail. He did not want to be there. So Boss waited till the car was out of sight in the dawn glow, and then felt along the door jamb for the push button. He felt bent, old, broken, if the truth be told. He did not know but what this was the last free breath of his life. He knew the mercilessness of the big fellows, how hard and grim they are when they go against a victim in the wide lands of the deserts and wildernesses.

"Howdy. What do you want?" a heavy voice demanded from within the thick door.

"This is So Boss Parkey, Sheriff," the visitor replied. "I'm giving myself up."

"You are?" the voice replied. "That straight goods, Parkey?"

"Yes, sir. I wasn't organized for running away."

The door opened, and the sheriff came out. Parkey heard him drop a short gun on the stand in the corridor. Barehanded, Hotchkiss came to shake. The sheriff wore a suit of pink pajamas and stood barefooted. Parkey was in his checkered woolen shirt, chaps, wide brimmed hat, and held his cartridge belt with two holsters swung in his left hand.

They shook hands, the guns were passed over. The sheriff lifted them up to look. Then he turned to gaze at Parkey, and blue eyes looked into pearl gray blue there in the increasing light of dawn.

"I don't just get your idea, cowboy?" the officer inquired.

The other twisted his hat a minute, controlling his emotions. He had not prepared much for this moment. Giving up had seemed a simple thing to do. Instead, it needed explanation. There was only one to make. Lies are sometimes lacking when they would be most opportune. Parkey's imagination failed him. The habit of facing the music, of honest courage, had grown on him, this last few hours.

"I figured I'd better come in," he said. "I reckoned it wouldn't be quite fair to —to that new deputy sheriff you appointed, not to. I think a heap of Lena Plack, Sheriff. I kinda thought it was a good joke, your appointing her. But it wasn't. I reckon you calculated some, yourself, how I'd see it. Course, when a man's wanted an honest officer can't no way compromise between friendship and duty."

"Well, no! I didn't quite get to see so far as that, Parkey," the sheriff admitted, frankly, "but I get you. I see what you mean. Course you know what she did to the Paytons—to old Hank?"

"What she did to them?" Parkey turned. "What'd she do, Sheriff?"

"Why, John Payton bushwhacked Dales, and got him. Old Hank stepped in and she—Deputy Sheriff Plack just naturally come through, herself. She winged old Hank, sure 'nough! He's in the hospital, now. And when she'd done her duty, she up and fainted. I appointed her to be under sheriff, but she resigned. It was on account of you, probably. She couldn't do her legal duty against you, old man. Prob'ly you can figure out yourself what it meant to her; why she felt that way about it."

So Boss Parkey turned away, and went into the jail. The big grating door barred his progress, and Hotchkiss motioned him into a side room where Dales had lived—a cell without bars or outside locks.

"This'll be your dormitory," the sheriff said. "I reckon a man who came in the way you did isn't going to need steel to reinforce the bonds of his conscience."

"That's right, Sheriff," So Boss nodded. "And I appreciate your feeling."

Revelers on their way home from the Red Lode saw the two figures on the jail uncovered balcony. Both were recognized. Word was flashed around the little town, and a few hours later the usual Sabbath calm and quiet along the main street was broken by the coming of many people to confirm the rumor. So Boss Parkey had come to town. Many shook his hand, embarrassed to the point of talking about the weather, which was uniformly sunshiny and starlit in that country, with rare cloudbursts and northers.

Neither the sheriff nor Parkey made explanations. Between them was a bond of confidence. The private, personal reason for Parkey's coming in was hidden beneath the simple fact that he preferred to face the charge and not become a fugitive and habitual criminal.

He had challenged the community. The time was ripe for revolt against one man rule, right or wrong. Sheriff Hotchkiss had definitely told old Hank Payton he would have to remain a prisoner, charged with helping kill Under Sheriff Dales. Men who owed the Payton Bank a lot of money found themselves uneasy beneath the bonds of that kind. And besides, Payton's financial position was now insecure. His one grip on the region was slipping.

"The cowboy says he expects a fair trial," Hotchkiss remarked in ears that would receive a sentiment like that.

Parkey had come to claim the honor of the community, that it do its duty regardless of fear or favor. Men have come to courts in frontier towns which failed to live up to their high opportunity. Hotchkiss bluntly put it that way. If Parkey's life and liberty were at stake, the sheriff's own sense of probity was also in jeopardy. The odd spectacle of sheriff and prisoner demanding fair play against a rapacious and slipping power was presented, as often happens in politics, not always on the frontier.

So Boss Parkey at the jail had hundreds of visitors. Not one went to the hospital to get the views of Hank Payton. The crippled old fellow did not even know till late in the afternoon that the cowboy had come in to give himself

up. Then by chance he overheard his nurse and the superintendent of the hospital talking about the surrender as they stood outside in the corridor. Immediately he snorted and demanded attention.

"You say that fellow So Boss Parkey's come in?" Payton asked.

"Yes, indeed, sir, this morning. Came to the sheriff."

"Why wasn't I told?" he exclaimed, angrily.

"The rules prohibit conversation with patients," she replied imperturbably, turning her back on him.

He relaxed, cowed on his uncomfortable bed by the evidence of his observation. The girl's bearing had ceased to be deferential. The hospital rules loomed before his helplessness. Flocking to his mind came a sense of realization. The law, no less than the breaking of his flesh and bone, now held him prisoner. Even a slender young woman could enforce against him mere Rule Number VI, as tacked on the inside of the door of his room. A girl had shot him down, permanently crippled him, for shooting an officer of the law.

All the rest of his life he would be subject to hired assistance, himself partially helpless physically. To a man accustomed to doing his own things, demanding subservience in officers, courts, ranch superintendents, debtors, and a whole population of all kinds of people, regardless of what he required, the realization that now he was subject to rules, and must obey and wait the will or whims of others, was a stunning blow.

Chapter XVI

What Lena Loved Most

LENA PLACK returning toward the county seat grew more and more indignant. For a long time she had been free and in some measure willful, but now she was going back with honest resentment in her heart and soul. She was tired of crooked deals, of evasions, of mean selfishness. Her spirit rose with high vision and strength of mind.

"I've stood all I'm going to. Old Payton can't get away with it; I won't let him!" she said to herself. "I'll see that he doesn't escape!"

Before her opened other avenues of attack. It was a shame that So Boss had been driven into flight for an honest deed and a regrettable accident. He must have a fair trial before a jury that hadn't been hand picked. She would demand that. To get it, she would be obliged to face old Hank Payton's political cronies. Well, she would.

She smiled, at a suggestion back in her own mind. She was wise, this girl who had taught, won appointments, studied politics and human nature. She loved a man, and she loved fair play. And in this mood, at sunset that Sunday, she rolled downtown in her car and found the street thronging. She wondered what it meant. Her eyes turned to the jail, and there on the steps, sitting in an armchair beside Hotchkiss was *Parkey!*

She turned to a bystander, one of her own teachers. "What happened, Laura? How comes it Parkey's in?"

"He surrendered this morning, Miss Plack," the girl replied.

"He gave himself up?"

"Yes. He came and asked for a fair trial."

"I see; thank you, dearie," Lena said, absently.

A minute or two later she steered her car up the jail driveway and on the instant the gossiping of the scattered groups ceased. Her absence had been noted. The sudden arrival on the scene with her car yellowed by alkali dust was not without its dramatic quality. Her self-possessed and quick drive to the center of the picture was characteristic. She left her car, swung from under the steering wheel and stepped to the platform of the balcony to greet So Boss who started to his feet as he discovered her coming.

"Howdy, So Boss!" she greeted him. "Mighty glad, indeed, to see you here!"

"Yes, I knew you'd feel that way about it," he answered. "I sort of had the notion it was what you'd rather I'd do."

She blinked at his frankness and openness. His meaning was unmistakable. There was nothing under heaven that he would not do to please her. He would even read across a hundred miles of space and figure out the real wish of her own thoughts.

"Sheriff," she turned to Hotchkiss who was eyeing the scene with veiled expression, "where'll I find the county judge? I want to talk to him."

"I'll telephone him so," the sheriff replied, and a minute later he came from his office.

"He's waiting on you," he said.

Without explanation she left the jail abruptly. Her bearing, her expression, the light in her eyes did not invite interruption or inquiry. Two hours later, the county judge summoned Sheriff Hotchkiss, who went in the dark to the judiciary officer's house. He found that Lena Plack had come to dominate the situation by sheer force of personality.

He listened amazed as he heard from the county judge—really a circuit court head—the demands that Lena had made. "What do you think about it, Sheriff?" the judge asked.

"I'll say this," Hotchkiss replied. "You give the orders, and I'll serve them."

"All right, then; that's what I'll do," the judge replied. "Fact is, we've already prepared them—our friend here and I have."

Five or six slips of paper changed hands, and Hotchkiss read them carefully. "First thing tomorrow—Monday morning," the sheriff said.

"I dated them tomorrow, you'll notice," the other man observed.

"Now I think I'll go find something to eat," Lena remarked.

"We'll all go down to the restaurant," the sheriff suggested, and called up the jail, so that So Boss Parkey sat with them over several good steaks, a highly irregular proceeding, but appropriate at that.

In the morning Hotchkiss went to the hospital. He sat down beside old Hank Payton's bed. He read the several documents which had been prepared. These announced the beginning of proceedings to throw old Hank into bankruptcy, the putting of his financial affairs into the hands of a receiver, and a commission of inquiry into his sanity, among other things. What Lena Plack had not been able to think about, the judge had.

The tables were turned on old Hank Payton. The processes which he had long used to his own satisfaction were now reversed. The attack on his bank was the center of the inquiry into his affairs. He turned pale and flushed red by turns, but he said nothing. He had overreached himself. He was spread too thin, his margin was too narrow, and ruin was upon him. And he was a big enough man to see what was at hand. His day of power was gone. "All right, Sheriff," the bedridden cripple assented. "Go to it. I won't, I can't fight it. If I could walk on my hind legs you'd have to see me rear, but——"

He turned his head away, and his eyes which had always been keen and bright, changed. The crystalline brilliance dulled into milky lackluster. And Sheriff Hotchkiss felt as mean as a dog caught stealing a chicken, for no one would have dared treat Payton that way in the old days.

"We aim to be on the level, you know," Hotchkiss suggested. "If you'd suggest trustees, or names?"

Payton turned to look the sheriff in the eyes, and the official did not flinch. "Who's behind it?" the man asked, abruptly. "Who put this over on me? I don't know anybody who had the wit, the nerve to do it. Somebody has called your hand—mine. Who was it?"

"Well, Lena Plack suggested this'd be the best way to protect the interests of all concerned."

"That blamed—um-m." Payton thought a while. "How come she—what does she want, Sheriff? I quit. I'm done for. She wins. Tell her I—well, I can't help myself, now. She's sure skinned me. But—" he grinned at his own humor—"my hide'll be worth more, if it ain't nailed up in the sun. You know what I mean. What started her off, anyhow? I never bothered her."

"So Boss Parkey."

"That da—um-m. Course, that's it. All right. Doggone! Well, damn my eyes, appoint her receiver. Tell her, by Gad, if she don't go straight—umpm."

Payton was practicing unaccustomed restraint on his tongue. His day for calling down was gone. He sighed. "Go to it. I'll sign the papers—left-handed!" He choked a little. "Can't help myself. I know when I'm whipped, Hotchkiss."

"I'll bet she gives you the best she can, Payton," the sheriff said. "I mean if you'll consent to her being receiver. I hadn't thought of her. Do you mean you'd consent to that?"

"I'd consent to any blamed thing," the man replied. "What could I do?"

Accordingly Sheriff Hotchkiss carried

the word to the anxious group who waited the result of the paper serving and conference. Some were only too eager to have the old eagle's pinions trimmed, hoping to rise on their own vulture wings. They were unprepared for the shrewd fellow's utter surrender—into the hands of Lena Plack. She was the most surprised. Her own vindictive purpose was run into a resistlessness that left her on her honor. And the debtors, creditors, little powers realized that in all his life Hank Payton had never played so shrewdly as in throwing his affairs into the hands of the woman. Her intelligence and her honesty were more to be depended on than anyone else's in reach. If he could not have his own way, he could accept at least the hope of a square deal.

He signed the papers, accepted Lena Plack as receiver. He never did anything by halves. He looked from his bed at the trustee, when she came to discuss the problems with the only one who knew the ramification of his affairs. "That hundred thousand dollar robbery knocked me out," he told her. "I don't know but what I needed what I got. I'll help you all I can. I see I have to, and that's all there is to it."

"I'm going to do the best I can, Mr. Payton," she replied.

Down at the post office Sheriff Hotchkiss met her. "So Boss wants to talk to you," he reported.

She colored as she looked at the jail. Her self-possession wilted before the thought of the cowboy. She even hesitated to cross to the office where Parkey was waiting for her. She had failed him at one rendezvous, and she felt guilty—an absurd emotion—at the memory. Nevertheless she turned around to walk into the grim building.

Parkey had watched her coming. He stood waiting for her. Perhaps there is a more pathetic situation than two lovers meeting, when one is a prisoner. "Sheriff tells me you're receiver for Payton," Parkey said, directly. "I know where the bank loot is."

"You *do*, So Boss?" she cried as though hurt.

"Yes," he nodded, coloring at her mistrust. "It was that, 'specially, I wanted to tell you about, when I asked you to meet me out yonder. You see, those robbing scoundrels fooled me. I took it away. I want to give it back, where it belongs."

"Oh, forgive me; I'm so glad!" she cried. "But you know what made me——?"

"Naturally I do; what else could you think?" he laughed shortly. "I was in Dutch. You'll find the loot above the Sweetwater, on the south side of the canyon. A juniper tree stands on a point, the only one along there. Above it you'll notice a cliff, with a lot of air holes honeycombed in it. One has a rock lying in the mouth. Over to the right, about twenty feet is a small crooked hole. In that, plugged back, you'll find the loot."

"Won't you go with me after it?" she invited.

"Why, yes, sure—oh!" His cheeks flamed. He was a prisoner. The man who had lived free—well, he wasn't his own boss.

"Perhaps I can fix it," she observed. "Excuse me."

She anticipated no difficulty. Hotchkiss was a good fellow. She told him what she now knew. The sheriff shook his head at first, but was overborne.

"We're going out to Sweetwater," she told Parkey.

AT SUNSET they stood up the canyon slope, where Parkey pulled the loot from the bank out of the drip hole in the sandstone. Then they ate dinner cooked over a dry cedar fire beneath the sky of crystalline colors. They said almost nothing, for talk was superfluous. They were by no means out of their difficulties. At the same time they knew they had each given more, already, for each other than they could have done even in their own interests.

They drove southward after dark. They stopped at the Snake Brand ranch, where Parkey went over to the corral and whistled up his horses. They talked with Sugar, the foreman, for a few minutes, and then went on their way.

When her car swung up to the jail the sheriff came out on the instant to greet them. Lena handed him the package.

"Put it in the safe please," she asked.

"You *found* it? So you got it?" he exclaimed excitedly. "Why that looks like perhaps old Payton can come square!"

"I'm cancelling a lot of obligations,

both ways," she said. "We'll see. The audits will give us a straight line on his affairs."

When she deposited the hundred thousand in the Racklack Bank next morning, the balances enabled the institution to open. Her success was beyond dreams. Over the telephone, the Reno creditors were glad to hold back their worried projects. As a square shooter, Receiver Plack could obtain extensions and accommodations Payton himself could not have forced in the circumstances. The receivership had prevented depreciation and ruin.

The accountants who had struck balances through the multitude of the big fellow's affairs brought the sheets as certified, to Lena's desk. The black ink was set against the red. She made agreements between those who owed Payton and those he owed, by which he was cancelled, and the obligations made direct. The process simplified and modified the business.

The day came soon when she called at the hospital with a statement fully prepared and adjudicated. Old Hank read the papers one after another.

The final sheet was a summary. He stared at it, his face reddening and the lackluster brightening into flashing color again. "Is that *right?*" he asked. "I got that much left—a hundred and 'leven thousand?"

"That's the balance," she nodded, "in your favor."

"But I thought I was done for?"

"We got back the hundred thousand bank loot; Parkey captured it from the robbers——"

"Why, I knew the money was back," Payton exclaimed. "Nobody told me Parkey—you mean So Boss, that cowboy?"

"Yes."

"He brought it back?"

"He had it cached, after taking it from the robbers."

"But I owed more'n I had!" he exclaimed. "I wasn't solvent. I had some bad debts due me——"

"I swapped them off, dollar for dollar, against what you owed."

"They'd do that for you?"

"Yes; and there were a lot of cattle—shippers. I cashed them in against debts, both ways. We got good prices."

"I thought I was ruined," he mused. "I was like a rooster on a hot plate, on the jump. Le's see—your fees——"

"Oh, I looked out for that," she chuckled.

"I didn't expect it of you, pulling me out of this hole," he said, as if he reluctantly admitted her prowess and finesse.

"When I saved you, I saved the others," she observed. "A smash would have hurt everyone. So you're satisfied?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Now I suppose you're going to press that charge against me—the shooting?"

"You bet!" she declared emphatically.

He cringed. There was no friendship in what she had done. Between them no love was lost.

"Well, all right." Payton lifted one corner of his mouth. "When'll I be discharged from bankruptcy, anyhow?"

"Soon as the judge'll allow it!" she shivered. "There'll be no delay. Simply a matter of signing the papers, if you don't make any kick."

"All right. I ain't rousing any rumpus, young lady," Payton sighed. "I'll sign a consent and acceptance of the receiver's trustee report—this."

She wrote a simple acceptance, and he scrawled a left hand signature. His eyes looked at her straight and emphatic back as she left him. Then he reached for the telephone. Within half an hour, Sheriff Hotchkiss was in the chair Lena Plack had vacated.

"I've had some hard feelings against you and the boys," Payton began bluntly. "When I was down, I thought you were crowding me hard. Miss Plack came in, just now, and showed me I'm not broke. Who saved me, anyhow?"

"She did," Hotchkiss replied. "Probably there are those who would have stripped you clean. She isn't any friend of yours, but she's a square shooter."

"In the circumstances, that made her the best friend I ever had, Sheriff," Payton sighed. "Course, she don't like me personally. She says she's pressing that charge—the shooting scrape against me."

"She is, too; demands trial on the indictment."

"She did a heap of swapping, shaping up my debts and credits, Hotchkiss."

"Yes?"

"I don't want to be tried for that shooting, Sheriff." Payton's voice was hollow. "I was mad. I lost my tem-

per. I can't stand a trial, though. I'll plead guilty, first. Seems like I'm all gone inside, somehow. I wonder if we couldn't make a dicker, now—another swap, Sheriff?"

"You mean?"

"Exactly; you know her pretty well; she might listen to you, Sheriff. How about it?"

Hotchkiss grinned. Payton, too, smiled, withal a bit wanly. Suffering had told on him. Weeks on his back had given him pause. He was hardly the same man who had bulldozed the country and pulled his guns on Under Sheriff Dales.

"I'll go find out," the sheriff replied. "I can't promise anything. I'll tell the cockeyed world there's no telling what some of these conscience folks will do. I'll have to see what's in it."

Sheriff Hotchkiss, when he found Lena Plack, doubtfully approached the subject of his mission from Hank Payton. "You know he's feeling your work for him a lot," the sheriff said. "You made a big hit with him. He don't blame you none, though, pressing that shooting charge against him. At the same time——"

"Well?" she asked, coldly.

"You have the cinch onto him, course," the diplomat admitted. "What you say'll go. Everybody knows it. He does, as well as the rest. He's going to plead guilty to that promiscuous killing. That'd save the county quite a lot of expense. If he fought, why, probably a trial'd cost ten thousand."

"Time he stopped making trouble for the county," she approved. "It'd be a decent thing for him to do."

"Now about So Boss Parkey?" Hotchkiss inquired.

"Eh?"

"You see how it is. That depends on Payton."

"Oh!" the eyes of the young woman turned with a birdlike snap at the eyes of her companion. Then she looked out of the sheriff's office into the court house over the housetops at the valley up the north between the Silver Breaks and the Waning Glories.

For a long time she stared. The wrong of it, the right of it, were now obvious enough. "Payton sent you to me!" she accused.

"Why, you see, we've always been kinda friendly, training together."

This was politics. This was the *sub rosa* dickering of public life. The young woman shrank in the presence of her necessity. "Oh, I don't know what to do!" she turned to him.

"It's a darned hard situation," he nodded. "At the same time, you've been cancelling old Hank's obligations against his rights. He said perhaps it might be you'd make another swap."

"Oh I know! I can buy Parkey free by not—not pressing the charges against Payton! You're horrid. You know Parkey didn't mean to——"

"Well, it was his own son the old man was trying to defend, you know!"

The girl twisted her handkerchief and closed her eyes. "Oh, I couldn't go into court and say——" she began.

"Leave it to us!" the sheriff exclaimed, relieved. "I'll have a talk with the prosecutor and judge. It'll be all right! All they have to do is *nolle prosse* the cases, that's all."

"It's enough!" she clicked her teeth with spirit.

"'Tain't so much different from being discharged from receiverships and bankruptcy," he assured her. "You can see how that is—moral obligations, instead of financial."

"Please don't mess things up any worse than they are," she told him.

He took his departure. He was gone some little time. She rocked in the big desk pivot chair for more than an hour.

Then he returned. "It's all fixed," he grinned. "Court orders issued in both cases. Payton's discharged on motion of the prosecuting attorney. Judge told me no use holding So Boss Parkey in custody any longer, without his having a hearing."

"Does he know it?" she whispered.

"Who, Payton?"

"No!" she grimaced. "You know who I mean!"

"I'll deputize you to go tell him," the sheriff grinned. "Unless you'd rather I'd go?"

She hesitated. To bear to So Boss Parkey the news of his release was a cheerful enough duty, but she could not help thinking beyond the moment of that pleasant word. She went to Hotchkiss first, shaking his hand. "Could I ever thank you enough?" she asked, uncertainly, and then without awaiting his an-

swer, she went on her way, stirred by the fact that each minute was to So Boss Parkey, an age of waiting.

So Boss was reading in the jail office. He was a trusty, of course. He started to his feet when Lena Plack entered. She did not meet his inquiring gaze. She walked, nevertheless, close to him. "I've—I've fixed it!" she said, closing her eyes.

"Eh? Fixed what, the receivership?" he puzzled.

"Yes—that—everything!" she whispered. "The charges are all squashed. You can go, now. The court has ordered your release."

"Ordered my release? Lena! You *mean* it?"

"Yes!" she nodded. "I—I promised not to prosecute that old Payton, and—and they— You don't think I did wrong, do you, dear?"

"Think you wrong for trading me loose?" he laughed. "Oh, well. The old boy's a pretty good old sport, probably. I'm grateful to you; it was a good deal to do for me!"

"Yes, that's why I did. If you don't care, why I du-don't!"

He caught her in his arms. He didn't bother himself any, trying to figure out her viewpoint. At the same time, after the first ecstasy of his enthusiastic reception of her kisses, and liberality with his own, when he could give his jealous lips a chance to speak he said, "I see. I get you. The big job in this world is seeing things right, to do 'em! I only hope I can earn the right to you. But I'll find the way. I'm through wasting, through skylarking. I promise it—if you'll take my word?"

"There's nothing I'd love so much!" she sighed, relaxing in his arms.

CARAVANS OF THE PIONEERS

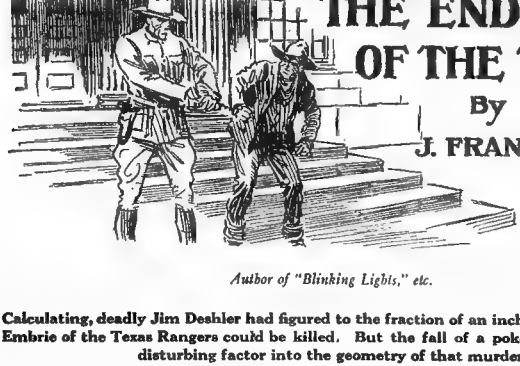
FROM an article written in 1824 the following is taken to show one phase of the life of settlers along the Indian frontier:

"The acquisition of the indispensable articles of salt, iron, steel and castings presented great difficulties to the first settlers of the western country. They had no stores of any kind, no salt, iron or iron works; nor had they money to make purchases where these articles could be obtained. Peltry and furs were their only resources before they had time to raise horses and cattle for sale in the Atlantic states.

"Every family collected what peltry and fur they could obtain throughout the year, for the purpose of sending them over the mountains for barter. In the fall of the year, after seeding time, every family formed an association with some of their neighbors, for starting the little caravan. A master driver was selected from among them, who was to be assisted by one or more young men, and sometimes by a boy or two. The horses were fitted out with pack-saddles, to the hind part of which was fastened a pair of hobbles made of hickory withes. A bell and collar ornamented his neck. The bags provided for the conveyance of salt were filled with feed for the horses; on the journey a part of this feed was left at convenient stages on the way down, to support the return of the caravan; large wallets, well-filled with bread, jerk, boiled ham, and cheese, furnished provisions for the drivers. At night, after feeding, whether put in pasture or turned out in the woods, the horses were hobbled and the bells were opened.

"The barter for salt and iron was first made at Baltimore. Frederick, Hagerstown, Old Town and Ft. Cumberland in succession became the place of exchange. Each horse carried two bushels of alum salt, weighing eighty-four pounds the bushel. This, to be sure, was not a heavy load for the horses, but it was enough, considering the scanty subsistence allowed them on the journey. The common price for a bushel of alum salt, at an early period, was a good cow and calf; and, until weights were introduced, the salt was measured into the half bushel by hand, as lightly as possible. No one was permitted to walk heavily over the floor while the operation of measuring was going on.

C. E. M.



THE END OF THE TRAIL

By

J. FRANK DAVIS

Author of "Blinking Lights," etc.

Calculating, deadly Jim Deshler had figured to the fraction of an inch just how Captain Embrie of the Texas Rangers could be killed. But the fall of a poker hand brought a disturbing factor into the geometry of that murder

IN SOME more northern States, little Jim Deshler would have hanged or gone to the electric chair. In Texas, where homicide is both traditionally and legally condoned under many circumstances, a jury assessed his penalty at ten years.

Little Jim, as mild mannered and mean a man-killer as ever smuggled contraband across the Rio Grande, turned slowly to Ranger Captain Phil Embrie, when the jury had been thanked by the judge and was filing out of the courtroom, and held out his wrists for the handcuffs. His right arm came into position awkwardly. Embrie, while arresting him two months before, had neatly drilled his right collarbone with a pistol bullet, and the shoulder was still stiff.

His mild, flat, expressionless blue eyes raised themselves to the ranger's face. "Ten years," he remarked, quietly, almost casually. "About seven, with good behavior, ain't it? That ain't so cussed long. And when it's up——"

His eyes flickered from side to side to make certain no one save the ranger was within earshot; little Jim was a man who calculatingly looked ahead, and it would be foolish to have any witness to a threat. His voice lowered and became even softer than normal. "Maybe it'll be my turn some day after that, Cap'n," he said. "It's a long trail that don't have any twist in it."

Captain Embrie, clicking the handcuffs tight, spoke no less casually than his prisoner. "I may be dead by then, or I may have forgotten how to shoot. But if I'm living and still got my thumb, go as far as you like, Jim. All comfortable? We'll be moving along toward the jail. You'll have time to get a bit to eat before you start for Huntsville."

OLD Jake Snead, governor partially by grace of influences that neither ornamented the State nor added to its good reputation, sat in his office at the capitol and made objection to an earnest plea from Sheriff Anthony Garrison of Salado County. Old Jake was not consciously an evil man—indeed, in many ways he was not at all a bad governor according to his lights—but he had been born in Texas in a day when such violence was to be taken for granted, and his tolerances embraced many people and things that the law tabooed. Also he was a disciple of political expediency.

"But, listen, Jake!" the sheriff protested when the governor had spoken. "I ain't asked much of anything else of you in all the time I've been in, have I? And now you're going to run again, with a fine fight against you, so that you need every county you can get. Well, you know how strong that gang that Little Jim ran with is down in Salado. And they're sure riding me hard. If we don't get Deshler out of the pen——"

The governor frowned. "But he hasn't served two years yet. There's been a lot of holler about my pardons already. I've rather thought maybe it

would be best to let up on turning any more loose until after the nomination is settled."

"I didn't ask for any of those pardons," the sheriff reminded him. "Why shut down just in time to leave me out?"

"But, darn it all!" Snead exclaimed. "This Deshler has got such a rotten record. He's killed four men——"

"Killed 'em all in self defense, didn't he?" Garrison interrupted. "All but the last one, anyway, and it was an even break right up to the minute the jury came in that they might figure he told the truth about how that one happened. He got turned loose in all the three other trials. Proved every time that the other feller went after his pistol first. And this last time, if it hadn't been for that cussed Phil Embrie——"

"That's another thing, Tony," the governor interrupted. "You've asked me to move Embrie over to some other part of the State, and I just naturally can't. He's the best ranger captain on border duty. Everybody in Texas knows it, and if I was to have the adjutant general transfer him somewhere else it would do more harm than good. He is still located in Salado County, headquarters at Poulton. When this Little Jim gets out he goes back to Poulton; he's got to, to be of any political help to you. Jim Deshler's reputation don't include forgiving any enemies. What's going to happen between him and Embrie?"

Sheriff Garrison's eyes narrowed ever so slightly and significantly. "What do you care, Governor?" he said. "Embrie's no friend of yours, is he? Of course he ain't taking any open part in politics, but it ain't any secret how he and his friends feel about you, is it? Or about me, either."

"Maybe not," the governor conceded.

"Great rattlesnakes!" the sheriff cried exasperatedly. "It's got so, down in that county, that I can't promise my friends anything a-tall! Little matters come up, here and there, such as we all have to consider in a border county like that, and I think I got 'em all fixed, and first thing we know in jumps that cussed ranger and gums things all up. If I could get anything on him——"

"You did, once, didn't you?" Snead asked dryly, and the sheriff scowled at the recollection.

"That was a rotten jury that tried him," he said. "Him and Lew McBride were in a room alone, and they got into a ruckus and there was just one shot—from Embrie's gun—and folks run in and found McBride dead. And no pistol on him. But Embrie done claimed Lew *had* a pistol and had started to draw it."

"He claimed, too, that as you were coming into the room and while the crowd was milling round—he being too busy just that minute to attend to it—he told you to be sure to get McBride's pistol and take charge of it for evidence, you being a deputy sheriff at that time, didn't he?"

"Yes," the sheriff admitted. "But, like I told the jury, Lew didn't have any."

"Of course not," the governor agreed. "But I remember hearing something at the time, on the quiet, of course, about your handing a pistol that wasn't yours to—it was Henry Evarts, that got killed the next year in a fight on the Mexican side of the river, wasn't it?"

"But, cuss it, Governor, Lew McBride was one of our——"

"Oh, I'm not criticizing you," Snead said. "McBride is dead, and Evarts is dead, and Embrie got off on the murder charge, and it's none of my business to rake up ancient history. I don't expect you not to tell the same story, always, that you did then; but it just sort of came to me to let you know that I remembered some of the whys and wherefores. Seems to me I've heard that nobody ever mentions that killing to Cap'n Embrie, because the one man that ever did got into a mess of trouble, pronto. He's right sensitive, I've heard, about any claim that he ever shot an unarmed man."

"All that's close to ten years ago," the sheriff said. "This wanting Little Jim Deshler out of the pen in time for his gang to do us some good in the campaign is *now*."

The governor nodded appreciation of this point. "But suppose I turn him loose," he objected, "and he takes a notion to try to get Embrie for sending him up. According to all his past record, he's likely to, isn't he? That wouldn't help us so blamed much." He added, earnestly, "I'd like to do what you want, Tony, but there's more than

one side to it. Deshler's a dangerous hombre."

The sheriff of Salado County admitted this by saying, "But even so, Governor, after this bit in the pen ain't it a cinch he won't go to start anything that might send him back? He'll never go after a gun first—and Cap'n Embrie never does. I'll take a chance they won't have no trouble. Listen, Bill! It's going to be a close campaign, this year, county *and* State. You need him loose as much as me. But I'll put it on personal grounds as well as political. I haven't asked you for anything important since you've been governor. I'm asking this. Pardon Deshler."

The governor considered, then spread his hands in gesture of surrender. "All right, Tony," he said. "I'll have the papers made out tomorrow. I hope we won't be sorry."

"We won't," Sheriff Garrison promised confidently. "It'll cinch the county for you and me both. You can count on Salado from this minute on. Much obliged."

So Little Jim Deshler, three days later, came home to the town of Poulton, alighted from the train—and found himself face to face with Ranger Captain Embrie. In the background stood the usual idle gathering of citizens come to meet the train, among them Sheriff Garrison.

Little Jim ignored the others for the moment and addressed himself to the ranger. His voice was loud enough to carry to a plenitude of witnesses. "Howdy, Cap'n," he said. "Glad to see you. S'pose you and me let bygones be bygones."

The ranger nodded shortly. "Bygones *are* bygones," he said. "You and me'll have no trouble whatever—so long as you don't go to breaking any laws."

Deshler's flat, expressionless eyes were lifted to the ranger's face, and his voice raised itself still more as he said, reproachfully. "You ain't exactly meeting me halfway, Cap'n."

"What do you want me to do, kiss you?" Embrie demanded. "I said you and me'll have no trouble so long as you behave yourself."

"You might shake hands," Deshler said.

"And again I mightn't," the ranger replied. "I'm not your enemy, Jim—but that don't mean I'm your friend."

He turned away, and every man within hearing registered for future contingencies—as Little Jim had intended—that Deshler was repentant and wanted to square things with the ranger, and that Embrie had refused to take his hand.

There were few open comments, however, on the incident; in Poulton a bystander did not always know the affiliations and friendships of the man at his elbow. Some of the witnesses affected sternly not to have heard the dialogue. Others grinned. It was with some difficulty that the sheriff avoided being one of the latter. He had no understanding with Little Jim as to Ranger Embrie and at the moment he did not especially intend to have one. But he would not be averse—after election—to seeing nature take its course.

Garrison, in the conclusion of his talk with the governor, had been a true prophet. The enthusiastic support of Little Jim's friends turned a closely balanced scale. Salado County was cinched for governor and sheriff both. Enough other counties were also cinched to make Creed's renomination certain, and nomination for governor in Texas is equivalent to election.

With the tickets named, Salado County and Poulton, the county seat, settled down into normal activities, and the normal activities of Salado County not infrequently had to do with international contraband and other matters which Texas rangers were supposed to prevent if the county officials did not. Captain Embrie and the two other rangers of his small company who made their headquarters with him at Poulton had a reasonable percentage of successes in their labors against law-breaking, and a reasonable percentage of failures.

Their successes, one black night which seemed to some of Sheriff Garrison's friends propitious for the transportation of a certain cargo across the Rio Grande, included a seizure of valuable property, a running fight, and the death therein of one Ramon Valdez, who was a person of Mexican blood, Texas first paper citizenship, and a close affiliation, political and otherwise, with the sheriff.

Some people, immediately after this, looked for Embrie's prompt transfer to another part of the State; and that he continued to be located in Salado County was no fault of the sheriff's. Ex-

pectantly, Garrison again asked old Jake Snead to move him, but the governor, while not unsympathetic, was unwilling to act. Ambition had gripped him to follow his term as governor with one at Washington, and he was now avoiding criticism from the State's good people as he would an epidemic.

"It wouldn't do, not just now, Tony," he said. "Folks would be sure to say it was because he killed this Valdez. And Embrie was plumb within his rights in that killing; Valdez was shooting at him."

"What in thunder do you figure is going to happen to my machine down there if things like that keep up?" Garrison demanded. "You know what's necessary to hold that county."

"I know," the governor said. "I know. And when this blows over, if I can see my way clear—but sit tight and wait awhile, Tony. I can't do anything right now. You see that plain enough, don't you?"

"But, listen, Bill——"

Snead closed the interview pleasantly enough, but with finality. "For the present, you'll have to straighten things out down there yourself."

"All right; I will," the sheriff said, and left the governor uneasily wondering just what, exactly, he meant.

Little Jim Deshler, if he had been at all involved in this fracas the results of which so troubled the sheriff, had not been an actual participant. He went his quiet way about the community, kept clear of any illegalities that could be brought home to him, and came in no official contact with the law at all.

From time to time he and Captain Embrie met in public. Always Deshler spoke respectfully, "Howdy, Cap'n." Always Embrie replied, "Howdy, Jim." Otherwise, except on one occasion, they exchanged no conversation—and that was not an exchange.

The occasion was one autumn evening in the room back of Canuto Pantusa's barber shop, where Captain Embrie, with a comfortable little stack of red, white and blue chips on the table in front of him, was participating in the regular after supper poker game.

In theory, all gambling in Texas is a high crime and misdemeanor. In practice, while professional establishments are discouraged in most communities, private and "friendly" games—meaning games between acquaintances for moderate stakes—are, as they have been for generations, the most popular form of indoor entertainment.

That any official, even a ranger or sheriff, should participate in one at a proper off duty time and place is not a thing to arouse comment, especially in the border counties. And in the room behind the barber shop the play was very mild; table stakes with a one dollar change-in, as the southwestern terminology has it. With an enduring run of bad luck a participant might, in a long evening, lose fifteen dollars. More often the outcome, one way or the other, involved much less than five. Captain Embrie, a widower with little to occupy his mind on evenings when there was no duty to be performed, played there frequently.

For obvious reasons, he always occupied the same chair, behind the table with his back to the wall in the corner. When he could not get this place, he did not play.

On this night Deshler came in and stood for a time among the six or eight spectators. Little Jim, in the days before he went to the penitentiary, had been a pretty steady poker player, although seldom participating in so small a game as that at Pantusa's. Since his release, however, he seemed to have lost the habit, or his abstinence from cards may have been a part of his policy of avoiding even the smallest possibility of public trouble.

There came a hand, when Deshler had been watching the game fifteen minutes, in which Embrie raised the pot before the draw, was reraised, stayed, played his hand pat and pushed in all the chips in front of him, whereupon his opponent displayed three sevens as the openers and let him have it. The ranger, then, for advertising purposes, showed his winning hand. It contained three treys and two other cards of no relevance whatever. He gathered in the pot to a laughing chorus at the expense of the one who had allowed himself to be bluffed.

As the voices began to lower, Little Jim spoke admiringly, "I never see a whizzer run prettier, Cap'n."

Embrie, stacking his chips, must have heard him, but he did not seem to. The play continued. Again it had been registered in the minds of a number of

people that the ranger declined to be on any but the most formal terms with Deshler. After that, when they came into contact that necessitated either speech or the ignoring of one another, the same formula as before continued: "Howdy, Cap'n." "Howdy, Jim." Never anything more.

And never, at these casual meetings, was it absent from Phil Embrie's mind that Deshler had spoken soft voiced words while the handcuffs were being adjusted that day in the courtroom.

"Maybe it'll be my turn some day after that. It's a long trail that don't have any twist in it."

He had not forgotten them, and he did not believe Deshler had. But Deshler, as was ever plain to be seen from the absence of bulges in the proper spots, never carried a gun. Never, that is, until after the election, when Garrison, now safely in the saddle of county control for another term, appointed him chief deputy sheriff.

This was not a matter to cause any statewide sensation, as it might in some more Eastern commonwealths. From time immemorial, gunmen and, sometimes, badmen—the terms are not synonymous in the Southwest—have been made law officers. How else, in an earlier and wilder day, would it have been possible to put the fear of the law into the hearts of other gunmen and badmen? Ben Thompson and King Fisher, who passed from this life with twenty-seven pieces of lead divided between them in the course of one of the most spectacular gun fights ever recorded in Texas history, and who were men with a far flung reputation for violence, were at the moment of their death a city marshal and deputy sheriff respectively—although not in the town in which they at last faced fatal odds.

Deputy Sheriff Jim Deshler thereupon hitched on to his belt a holster containing a loaded forty-five, as becomes a deputy-sheriff on the border, and proceeded—adequately—to perform such duties of his office as did not interfere with the activities of his friends.

Then, within a month, the rangers, working with customs guards, caught two close henchmen of the sheriff coming across the river with three thousand dollars' worth of narcotics concealed on their persons, took them before a Federal court where the influence of the sheriff did not run, and started a program that promised to have its climax in Leavenworth.

Sheriff Garrison promptly had another conference with the governor, which got nowhere. The two henchmen, unable to arrange bail that would satisfy the court, were in jail. Other henchmen were hotly demanding that a stop be put to this interference with their means of livelihood.

Garrison, the evening he returned from his fruitless trip to the State capital, found Little Jim Deshler sitting alone in the sheriff's office. To Deshler's questioning eyes he made laconic reply, "Nothing doing. Embrie stays."

The chief deputy's mild gaze lifted itself to the sheriff's face. "That whelp ought to get his needings," he said.

There was silence for a full thirty seconds, while the pair looked understandingly into one anothers' eyes. Then the sheriff said, "If he'd only go after his gun first—in the presence of witnesses."

Little Jim came slowly to his feet and his right hand slipped to his thigh, where hung his forty-five. He lifted the revolver and let it fall back into its holster twice, as though, wondering as to its readiness of access in emergency, he was making certain that it slipped forth easily. Then his left hand went up to the front of his right shoulder and he patted the spot where, beneath his shirt, was a puckered bullet scar.

"My gun stuck that other time," he said softly. "If it hadn't——"

"Plenty of folks," the sheriff murmured, "have noticed he won't make up with you."

"Plenty," Deshler agreed. "Plenty." He waited a moment, but not to consider any plan; Garrison knew from the way he looked and spoke that one had long since been formulated in his mind. He said then, "There can't be anything official about it; it's just natchully got to be personal. Like you say, he's got to start it. Got to start it when his hand is a little further from a gun than mine is. Or, maybe, when he's got a coat on and I ain't."

By a nod the sheriff indicated that he approved these provisos aimed at establishing a handicap. "And plenty of witnesses," he said.

"If you was one of 'em," Deshler sug-

gested, "it would make it stronger. You wouldn't take part, of course."

Garrison's expression indicated he did not especially like this idea, but after considering it he said, "All right. But it's got to be absolutely according to law, Jim. Got to be absolutely regular, so there can't no court or jury find it anything but self defense. Otherwise, with your record——"

"Do you think I'm cussed fool enough to take another chance on the pen?" the chief deputy demanded. "It *will* be self defense. Everybody'll see him start first—or I don't start."

"He most always wears a coat," Garrison said. "But, at that, he's awful fast on the draw."

"Am I slow?"

For a moment neither spoke again, each revolving in his mind the possibilities. Then the sheriff suggested, "He sits in pretty often there in Canuto's back room."

Deshler nodded. "There can always something start in a game of draw."

"Will he keep on playing if you sit in?"

"For a few hands, anyway, I reckon. He wouldn't want to make refusing to play with me too raw."

"I saw him heading in thataway when I came down the street, just now," the sheriff said.

The corners of Deshler's lips drew down. "One time's as good as another," he replied.

His coat was hanging over the back of his chair, and he left it there. He removed his six-gun from its holster and carefully examined its loading and action. He again slipped it into and out of the holster several times. His flat eyes rested on the sheriff's expressionlessly. "I told him once it was a damn' long trail that didn't have any twist in it," he said. "Drift by in a few minutes."

Coatless, he went out of the courthouse, loafed aimlessly down the street, and strolled casually into and through the barber shop.

Captain Embrie, as usual, was sitting behind the table with his back to the wall, and the deputy sheriff observed with satisfaction that he had not removed his coat. He had to be certain, now—although at any time it was improbable that a ranger wouldn't be—that Embrie was armed. Moving, presently, to a place of vantage for this investigation, he saw the tip of the captain's holster hanging down his right thigh below the coat.

The butt and trigger of the ranger's weapon, of course, were up under the skirt of the coat. That would mean a second's delay, or a fraction thereof, in going into action. Enough of a handicap of itself, perhaps. More than enough if also the respective hands that snapped after their guns had substantially different distances to travel.

A player, with the remark that he had promised his wife to take her to the second run of the movie, cashed up four dollars and quit the game. Deputy Sheriff Deshler smiled thinly and dropped into the vacant chair. "Don't know when I've ever played a little draw," he remarked. "But if I take this lucky seat I might win me a little tobacco money."

Captain Embrie's face was impassive, but for a second or two Deshler thought he had it in mind to make some excuse and leave the table. If so, however, he decided against it and, as soon as the banker had supplied the deputy sheriff with his dollar's worth of chips, the cards were dealt.

Neither the players nor the four or five other men who were standing about as spectators especially noticed the entrance of Sheriff Garrison; it was not an unusual thing that he should drop in. He nodded to include everyone present and leaned against the wall at a point midway between what, in case of difficulty involving Deshler and the ranger, would be a possible bullet range.

A dozen hands had been played before Embrie and Little Jim became the two final participants in a pot that, for that game, was moderately large. Deshler, who had three tens, called Embrie, who displayed a flush, secured on a two card draw. Such a draw had been half way reasonable because the ranger's original three cards had continued the makings of a straight as well as a flush.

Embrie gathered in the pot and somebody dealt again. The ranger squared the five cards that fell to his lot, lifted them and held them close before his face as he peered at their denominations. Both his hands, thus, were elevated, at least a foot and a half from the pistol at his thigh. Deshler's hands were resting on the edge of the table before him, with

about eight inches to go for the draw.

He said, not unpleasantly, "That was some luck you had, Cap'n. Filling a flush with a two card draw was as easy as killing Lew McBride when he didn't have a gun."

There wasn't a man in the room who did not know that this long past incident out of his life was one of the things it was not advisable to mention to the ranger. Nobody, either player or spectator, spoke, but there was an instant electric atmosphere of tension. A man who stood behind Deshler slid swiftly to one side.

Embrie's eyes raised over the top of the squared cards and met the flat blue orbs of Deshler, staring, expressionless. He saw where Deshler's hands were resting on the table edge, and sensed that beneath the table the deputy sheriff's feet were ready for a spring that should bring him erect, his chair kicked out of the way behind him.

Out of the corner of his eye, in that same instant, the ranger caught a glimpse of Sheriff Garrison's face. It was not concealing thought. The eyes were eager, and a nervous tongue was wetting twitching lips.

If he failed to resent the insult, his prestige would suffer irrevocably. If he did not fail, there was Deshler's right hand, the fingers already half clutched, ready to leap the few inches to that pistol butt just out of sight below the table's edge.

Win or lose, if Embrie made the first movement toward a gun he was, according to law, the aggressor. Bad as the handicap already seemed to be in the deputy sheriff's favor, Deshler must begin the fight.

All these thoughts were well-nigh simultaneous. They occupied perhaps three seconds. Then Embrie merely opened the fingers of both hands where they held the cards at the level of his chin, and the cards dropped.

That he made no slightest movement toward a weapon everybody present could recall, afterward, but at the moment the gesture deceived Deshler, awaiting a different one so tensely. As the cards fell to the table he sprang to his feet, his right hand flashing to his holster.

It had eight inches to go. And Ranger Captain Embrie's right hand had but four inches to go to reach, not the forty-five that swung beneath the side of his coat but the smaller automatic that rested in a holster below his left armpit.

No time now, nor desire, to drill the right collarbone, as has ever been a ranger technique in making arrests where there is time and a safe margin of speed and skill. Across the table the slug from the automatic flew into Deshler's heart.

Perhaps the deputy sheriff had realization that he was hit and a conscious desperate will to return the fire. Perhaps his continuing action was only the reflex movement of a practically dead man in whom the killer spirit for a split second survives the shock that snuffs out the vital spark. As to this no one, of course, could ever be certain.

The weapon was clear of its holster when the ranger's bullet struck him, its hammer already drawn back and its trigger pressed so that the mere relaxation of his thumb would discharge it the instant its muzzle was sufficiently elevated to bear on Embrie. As he reeled at the lethal impact, twisting toward the left as he began to fall, his hand bearing the gun continued to lift.

The muzzle described a swift, wide, rising arc. His thumb let go. His bullet sped. Then he, and his smoking forty-five, and the chair that he had kicked backward, went crashing together to the floor.

Echoing that crash came a strangled groan from across the room, the fall of another body, and instantly that awesome throat rattle that sounds like nothing else in all the world save the departure of a human soul.

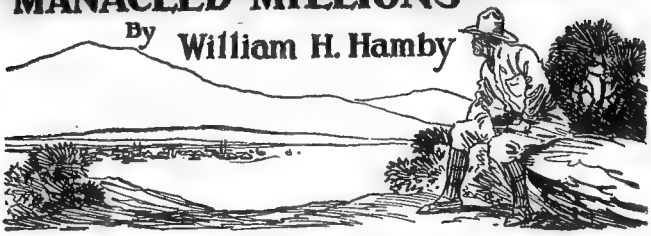
Ranger Captain Embrie strode through the barber shop, five minutes later, and walked steadily to the telegraph office. The message that he penned there was to his chief, the adjutant general.

Deputy Sheriff James Deshler made unprovoked attack on me and I was obliged to kill him in self defense. In the course of the fight he accidentally shot and instantly killed Sheriff Anthony Garrison. Eight witnesses. I await your investigation and instructions.

EMBRIE.

MANACLED MILLIONS

By William H. Hamby



Author of "The Mayor of Black Butte," etc.

Part I

Brutal, arrogant Adolph Blucker, manager of the great Pinto silver mine, contemptuously brushed aside young Lafe Jason when the latter sought a job. Within the short space of a few weeks, however, Lafe had become such a thorn in the flesh of the grasping bully, that Blucker found cold blooded murder his only means to the sudden success he craved.

Chapter I

DEVIL'S GULCH

BINGHAM is about nine miles long and half a block wide. It is strung along a road that wriggles up the canyon from the valley of the Great Salt Lake to the mines which have played a far reaching dramatic part in the affairs of the world.

The canyon is so narrow most of the way that there is only room beside the road for two houses and a garbage can; but at the end, the walls of the mountains recede a few hundred yards, allowing the town to widen out like the head of a puffing adder.

At the head of the canyon, and blocking any further spread of the town, rises Mount Soledad, a solid, massive pile of silence and solemnity. In early evening particularly, it looms clear cut and gigantic against the southwest sky, and seems grimly contemptuous of the feverish, grabbing, tawdry, blinking mining town at its foot.

It was the fourth of April, the first evening of spring, warm enough for all doors to be open. A glint of sun still touched the highest point of the mountains that rose up steeply to the east; but dusk was rapidly gathering in the canyon and the gulches that ran down into it.

A young man, wearing a blue serge suit of the country store vintage, came up the crooked street and stopped in front of Glick's Place. The door was open, the lights had just been turned on. From inside came a medley of sounds, click of cues on billiard balls, rough voices, a mechanical piano, and a raucous female singer admonishing the world to "Hold me tighter, baby!"

The young man glanced inside, took a step toward the door, hesitated and looked around guiltily. He glanced up at the gulch that was now a mere dark scar on the mountain to the west; his eye rose until it touched the line cut into the soft graying sky by Mount Soledad.

From the gulches, miners were pouring down into the town with their empty dinner pails, their overalls smeared with grease, or daubed with dried mud, or powdered by rock dust. Some of the men streamed on down the crooked road to houses of their own, more of them turned into the boarding houses across the street. Some of them went direct to Charlie's Eats, or Peg's Restaurant; others, not dressed in miner's clothes, entered the Paris Café; and still others passed the young man and went into Glick's Place.

The young man looked after them, and then, as with a sudden resolve, went in.

Two men stood leaning against Glick's bar, a soft drink bar where a

dollar stiffened the contents of the glass materially. One was Jerrold Dever, a fattish fellow with a wide mouth and glasses. The other was Steve Johns, a mining engineer. Their elbows were hooked over the edge of the bar, their faces turned toward the room where already four tables of stud poker were filled. And through a wide arch, a dance hall was showing signs of nocturnal awakening.

Both of them saw the young stranger come in. The fattish Dever laughed. "Where do you suppose that bird blew in from?"

"I don't know," replied Steve Johns seriously, "but my guess would be from Missouri. He has never been in a place like this before."

"No," assented Dever, "he is scared stiff right now, and if a fellow should punch him in the ribs with his thumb he would jump through the window."

"Not so sure about that," Johns shook his head. "You never can tell. He might land on your jaw."

The young stranger stood, almost shrank back, against the wall where he would be least in the way, yet could see everything. And he *was* seeing everything—rough Swedes, blustering Germans, swarthy Italians, sad eyed Mexicans, stolid natives, smoking, swearing, playing poker; and in the background lay the dance hall. The young man swallowed often, and moistened his lips. He was tall, with loose easy joints, but possessing the unconscious grace of the mountaineer. His mouth was his most distinctive feature; the lips, rather thin, but closed in a line as soft and smooth as a woman's—a sensitive, winsome mouth that seemed illy suited to the strong bony structure of his head and face.

One of the girls from the dance hall at the back threaded her way through the idlers who stood about the tables watching the poker players. Her eyes fastened on the young stranger over against the wall, and she headed for him.

There was a scared look in the young man's face as the girl approached.

"Hello, fellow." The dance hall girl had taken him by the arm. "Let's have a drink."

"I beg your pardon," he said in a low, slow voice that nevertheless carried to where Johns stood, "but I reckon a fellow ought not to drink before he eats."

"Well, when are you going to eat?"

"Tomorrow—or the next day—maybe," the young man replied soberly.

The girl tried to pull him toward the bar, but with a slight movement he drew away from her hand, and started to leave the place. As he passed Steve Johns, the young engineer said, "Hello, stranger."

"Hello." The young man stopped.

"From Missouri?" asked Johns.

"Yes. How did you guess?" His voice was slow and soft, but not quite a drawl.

"Came from there myself. My name is Steve Johns." The engineer offered his hand.

"Mine's Lafe Jason. I'm right glad to meet you." He took the hand in a firm, sure grip that revealed the lonesomeness of the chap far from home.

"You say you are from Missouri?" spoke up Jerrold Dever.

"Yes," nodded Jason.

"Happen to know Jim Gardner?"

"You mean the governor?"

"Yes. An old friend of mine. One time Jimmie and I were down to St. Louis, and as we were walking past a hat store he grabbed me by the arm and says, 'Jerry, I'll bet you the best hat in that store that you'll be governor of this State inside eight years.' 'I'll take the bet, Jimmie,' I said, 'and then I'll bet you another hat that you'll be the governor in four years.'" Dever paused, sucked his lips, and tapped the derby on his head with the finger of his left hand. "And that old lid is one of the bets." He readjusted the derby and turned to go.

"So long, fellows. Got to be moving. One of the Guggenheims came in today to dicker for the Aspen Mine, and the old man wants me to be present at the confab this evening."

"Your friend must be a pretty big man out here," remarked Lafe Jason as Dever went out.

"He's a good salesman," replied the engineer noncommittally. "By the way, there's a picturesque character." He nodded toward a big Mexican who had just strode past the gambling tables and stood in the entrance way of the dance hall, his back to them. He wore a wide hat with an ornamental band, a silk shirt, velvet trousers with a red sash around his waist.

"Miner," continued the engineer. "He's got a silver claim up on the side of the mountain above Devil's Gulch. Works like a demon all day with pick and shovel, and every evening dresses up and rides down here. His name is Pedro Mascajon. Pedro is a bad man to have trouble with."

Lafe Jason was leaning against the bar now, his left elbow resting on the edge. And while his eyes were watching everything, his right hand was slowly wrapping and unwrapping a strip of paper around his left forefinger. There was a curious, puzzled expression in his deepset, mild brown eyes. "They allow anybody to come here?"

"Oh, yes," Steve Johns grinned.

"I've read of things like this," said Jason slowly, "but I didn't suppose it was allowed anywhere now."

"Miners," observed Johns, "are rough men, dealing with rough elemental chunks of reality. They require rough amusements. You could hardly expect a mucker or a member of the bull gang to spend his evenings sipping lemonade and reading Shakespeare or Milton."

"Have you read them?"

"Oh, I've read a little of everything; but I don't often confess to highbrow stuff."

"So have I." There was an eagerness in Lafe's voice. "I grew up on a little shabby farm in the Ozarks, thirty miles from a town—and the only way out was through books."

Steve Johns turned his head and looked at Jason thoughtfully for a moment. He started to speak, but just then Pedro Mascajon approached them. *"Buenas tardes, señor,"* nodded the engineer.

"Good even, Mester Hons," responded the big Mexican, smilingly, giving the J in "Johns" the Mexican sound.

"Pedro," Johns waved his right hand toward Lafe, "meet my friend Jason."

"Ver' happy to meet you, señor," the Mexican smiled.

"And I'm glad to meet you," Jason responded, trying not to wince at Pedro's grip on his hand.

"He," Pedro nodded his head to indicate Johns, and grinned, "speak to me in Spanish, I speak to hem in Englese."

"Pedro—" Steve Johns spoke as to a friend—"do you need any men up at the Paloma?"

The Mexican gave a flourish with his right arm, "Any man the Señor Hons sends will always find place at La Paloma."

"Thanks." Johns nodded his appreciation. "I may send you a good man tomorrow."

The Mexican bought drinks—Jason taking lemonade—and then bade the two a ceremonious good night.

When he was gone, Johns turned to Jason. "Are you looking for a job?"

Jason hesitated. "Y-e-s. I'll have to be."

"Go up Devil's Gulch to the Paloma, and see Pedro tomorrow."

Chapter II

BLUCKER, OF THE PINTO

IT WAS eleven o'clock when Jason found a room at one of the shabbiest of the rooming houses, where he could get a wretched bed for fifty cents. He was gnawingly hungry. After paying for the room he had only thirty cents left, and had decided he must keep that for tomorrow. Yet, it was not an empty stomach that kept him awake, but nerves that tensed with excitement.

He was in a strange, alien land, and had seen strange, forbidden sights. It was one thing to sit hunched up over a smoky coal oil lamp in that little Ozark cabin and read of strange, wild adventures in foreign, wicked parts, and quite another to see them with his own eyes.

Life in that little cabin, stranded on its rough hillside in the back eddy of civilization, had been hard and drab. The only emotional outlet was the little church in the valley where a stern old mountain preacher had filled the boy's imagination with pictures of the horror of a literal hell where a soul that had committed the smallest sin must burn forever and ever.

His father quite sternly approved the teachings of that preacher; his mother believed them. And young Jason grew up almost to manhood with the fixed conviction that a man who swore, or drank, or touched a playing card, or danced, was hopelessly damned, and was to be shunned like a leper.

When after reading everything he could find, and devouring every textbook he could borrow, he finally got a chance to work his way through a mountain academy, his views were only par-

tially relaxed. Again when he spent two years in the mining school at Rolla, he found still further evidence that it was possible for young men to swear occasionally, drink, and to talk about a woman without being struck by lightning; and yet he still retained that inner horror of these manifestations of evil.

Tonight he had stood in the midst of them, in a place where men drank, and played cards for money, as though they did not even feel ashamed. And this was Utah, the land of the Mormons! In his father's house had been two books exposing Mormonism. He knew something of their history, of their horrible, sinful practice of polygamy, of their disbelief of the doctrine of the little church in the valley. They were, so the preacher had said in one of his denouncing moods, the wickedest emmissaries of the devil, worse than murderers.

Perhaps, if he had known it, it had been these very books of exposure, these sermons of denunciation of the Mormons, which had finally led him to Utah. Here in this land of open iniquity he had come to cast his lot and make his fortune.

"I've got to stay." He said it aloud. "And," he confessed honestly, "I want to."

LAFE JASON was out on the street next morning before the sun had more than touched the highest tips of the mountains. The spring air was crisp, and his stomach was not at all timid in its demands. Charley's Eats seemed to offer the most liberal inducements to enter. A card in the window promised two fried eggs, hot cakes and coffee for thirty cents.

While Lafe sat on the stool waiting with as much restraint as possible for the fried eggs, he tore a strip of the paper napkin and wound it around and around the forefinger of the left hand, and then slowly unwound it.

"Hello. You are an early riser." Jerrold Dever had taken the stool beside him, his fattish face pink from an early and hurried shave.

"Yes," said Jason, "when a fellow starts to look for a job he needs a long day."

"And when he gets a job here, he'll have a long day," chuckled Dever. "Just a cup of coffee," he said to the waiter who had paused in his rapid racing from one end of the counter to the other, "I'm in a hurry. Make it a couple of pork chops and some fried potatoes and toast, hot cakes and coffee. Oh, say—" the waiter had started to bawl the order to the kitchen —"while I'm waiting, give me some of that grape fruit." Then turning to Jason whose two eggs, unstripped with bacon, had arrived and were absorbing his attention, "What sort of a job do you want?"

"Any sort," replied Jason, "that will end in a million dollars or more."

"Wish I had a dollar," grinned Dever, "for every fellow who has started out to be a millionaire or president."

"I'd rather have a dollar," answered Jason, "for every one that never tried."

Jason had never been able to quench his burning ambitions by unctiously reciting the misfortunes of successful men. He had observed in even the remote backwater of the Ozarks that dyspepsia and divorce troubles were not exclusively the products of wealth.

"Something in that," grinned Dever, wiping his mouth at the termination of a pork chop while his left hand reached for hot cakes, "I'm admitting I'm out to make a barrel of money myself. You were talking last night to Steve Johns, a young chap, but one of the best mining engineers that ever hit the pike. Steve and I have got our eyes on a mountain out there—the one just south of town—a whole mountain of copper ore that's never been touched. It's low grade, but Steve and me are working out a plan for handling it. The mountain belongs to Joshua Waters, one of the finest old chaps who ever lived, and an awful good friend of mine."

Jason had finished, the thirty cents gone, but his stomach at ease, and sat waiting while Dever polished the syrup off the bottom of his own plate with the last remnant of the hot cakes. Dever slid off the stool, and reached in his pocket for a toothpick. "Know where you are going to work?"

"No."

"Why don't you go up to see 'Dolph Blucker. He's superintendent of the Pinto, the biggest mining proposition in Utah. 'Dolph is a good friend of mine. Tell him I sent you."

"Thanks very much." Jason felt a surge of relief and gratitude. He put out his hand and gripped Dever's. It

was just the sort of work he had hoped for.

The Pinto Mine was in the gulch west. Lafe followed the road up past the mills, long, dust covered buildings that rumbled and roared with grinding noises, on past a hole in the mountain side from which trams came about one a minute, loaded with ore, pulled by cables. These trams came and went by the mill, lost for a minute under a shed, and then emerged empty, again to return into the dark mouth of the mine.

Jason climbed on up the mountain side three or four hundred feet to a two story concrete building which a miner had pointed out as the offices. He waited from eight o'clock until eleven to see Adolph Blucker. But the fellow in the outer office, an assistant of some sort, said the superintendent was too busy.

The door into the adjoining room was open a good deal of the time, and Lafe saw a man sitting at a desk, who, he imagined, was Blucker. The superintendent occasionally spoke to somebody who brought a paper to him, or now and then picked up the telephone; but it seemed to Lafe there was plenty of time for him to tell a fellow whether or not he could have a job. He knew if he could once get in and tell the superintendent that he was sent by Jerrold Dever, a friend of his, the matter would be settled right there.

At last the assistant went out. The inner door was open, the superintendent did not appear abnormally busy. Lafe swallowed twice, opened the gate into the clerk's office, and walked through. He was scared so he was afraid his voice would fail him, but it did not. "Are you Mr. Blucker?"

"Yes." The tone was curt, annoyed. The superintendent did not look up.

"Jerrold Dever, a friend of yours asked me to come and see you."

"What about?" The tone was still annoyed. Blucker turned his head a fraction and looked at Jason at an angle of thirty degrees. His eyes were a muddy blue, his hair was ash colored, not gray, and his mouth was made for sneers.

"Why," said Jason, more embarrassed than ever, "I was looking for a job."

"Why didn't you go to the mine boss?" The tone was insolent in its imputation of an annoying blunder.

"I hoped—you see—" Jason tried to get a self-possessed tone—"I have had a year and a half in a school of mines—Rolla, Missouri——"

"Never heard of it." The corner of Blucker's mouth lifted. "And we don't give a damn whether a fellow has been to school or not, if he can handle a pick."

"I'd hoped for a job at something ——"

"Besides work," finished Blucker, looking hard at his desk and taking a paper weight from a sheet of paper covered with figures. "We have about a hundred of that sort along every week." He picked up a pencil and resumed his work as though the annoying caller had been annihilated.

Lafe waited two or three minutes to see if he intended to give him a further answer; then turned and went out, his face burning, his fingers clutched into his palms.

At sundown that evening Jason climbed up from the gulch that ran down to the main canyon from the east, toward a small house on the mountainside. He had not eaten since breakfast, and he had not found a job.

Near the house was an opening in the mountainside, and piles of rock and dirt thrown. It was the La Paloma Silver Mine. And the man who stood in the doorway watching his approach was Pedro Masteajon, the Mexican.

Chapter III

PEDRO OF LA PALOMA

LAFE JASON'S stalking into his office to apply for a job had put Blucker in a bad humor; that is, a worse humor than usual. But anger did not flush his face nor raise his voice. It seemed merely to distill a poison in his blood which showed in the slight sneering twist at the right corner of his mouth. His men feared that sneer more than a club, and at such times his superiors dreaded interviews with him. But he kept his job, for the Pinto at last was making dividends.

From a drawer Blucker took a long envelope containing a deed, which had arrived that morning from the East. He spread the paper before him, and bending over the desk, checked the description contained in the deed with the

numbers inside a penciled circle on a map.

A slight nod of satisfaction put a period to his examination. He returned the envelope and the deed to the upper left hand drawer of the desk, locked it, and put the key in his vest pocket, then called the young man from the outer office. "Go over and tell Gilchrist to send the two Mexicans working in tunnel twelve, to my office."

In less than half an hour the two Mexicans entered. Blucker turned in his chair. "Carlos, close the door and lock it."

Blucker talked to the two for half an hour. "Diego," he said to the dark one, "you better get a job as a driller, and Carlos can work outside. Go up there tomorrow. You'll have no trouble getting a job."

The two Mexicans arose, and in both their eyes as they stood looking down at Blucker, who remained seated, was the shifting shadow of intrigue and cupidity. Blucker reached into his hip pocket, drew out a billfold, and handed each of them a yellow bill. "For your expenses," he said briefly; and they went out.

The superintendent took up the telephone and called the mill. "Dan, seen anything of 'Nevada' Muck around there lately? That so? Send him up to the office."

About an hour later Muck came slouching in. He weighed over two hundred, and had legs as large as telephone poles. The left side of his face was scarred by a bad burn which, in healing, had drawn the lid of the left eye down so it showed a watery red streak under the white of the eye.

Blucker regarded him a moment from cold, slanting gaze.

"Sit down."

Muck slumped into a chair.

"This is a bad camp," Blucker remarked in a general tone. "It may be civilized in a few years, but there is no respect for life or property now. There have been several killings in the last month. And only one arrest."

Muck fumbled his hat and blinked his left eye. "It ain't any old lady's quiltin' party; that's a fact."

"I have just had you appointed deputy sheriff."

"So?" Muck blinked both eyes.

"Yes. You will remain on the company's pay roll, for we'll need you most of the time to protect our property. And I've ordered the cashier to increase your wages to two-fifty a month. And—" Blucker glanced at the window—"you can be a lot of help to Bingham."

"Yeah," Muck grinned. "I'll do Bingham a lot of good."

Blucker reached into the desk. "Here is your star. Your first duty," and Blucker's tone took on a sudden significant emphasis, "is to search La Paloma Mine for stolen goods. Find out where he is getting all the silver ore he is delivering to the Midwest Mill. Pedro Mascajon claims he is getting it from his own mine. You know silver mines. Discover just where he is getting it, and how much he is getting. Don't make any arrests—yet. But report to me as soon as the job is done."

LAFE JASON did not feel any degree of assurance as he climbed the steep side of the gulch to Pedro Mascajon's three room board shack. But if the newcomer had any subconscious impulse to turn back, it was overridden by one whiff from the open door of the leanto. Something hot and steaming and hunger tantalizing was cooking. He had not tasted food since six o'clock that morning.

Within thirty steps of the house, Pedro stepped down out of the doorway; a smile showed his white teeth. "Good even', Señor Hason." He had just recognized Lafe and gave a welcoming gesture. "Et es the friend of Señor Hons."

There is no magic in all the world like a welcome. A chilly tone and the world freezes up, but a light in the eye and an out-thrust hand and the fields are in bloom. Twenty minutes before Lafe had felt like a lost soul wandering hungry through black canyons. Now, a quick, cordial greeting, the smell of food, and the world was full of zest.

After the handshake, Pedro looked off down the dusk filled gulch toward the canyon in which now glimmered the lights of Bingham. On the top of Mount Soledad beyond was the silver light of the day's end. With a wave of the hand he included the whole scene. "Es et not—what you say—magnificat?"

"Yes," Lafe nodded gravely, "it is. But it is stern and terrible in a way,

too. It is a finish fight between man and the rocks."

"The most fight," Pedro showed his teeth and his black eyes lowered, "es with the devils who try to rob you of what you get. Me," and he struck his chest in a gesture of defiance, "from me they will get some lead—instead of silver!"

"*Ya está la cena,*" a gentle voice called from behind them.

Lafe turned his head and saw standing in the kitchen door an old Mexican woman, of an age somewhere between sixty and the Biblical allowance. Pedro turned to Lafe with a ceremonious bow.

"Señor Hason will honor us by sharing our soopar?"

"Señor," Lafe smiled, "I never accepted an invitation more unanimously in my life."

They sat down in the kitchen at a table covered with oil-cloth. The old woman put before them tin plates of frijoles and stewed meat. There was good brown bread and onions, boiled eggs and coffee, and pie from the bakers.

As the woman filled Lafe's coffee cup the third time, he smiled at her, rubbed the region of his stomach with a sigh of gratification and said, "I wish I could eat such cooking forever, without stopping!"

Pedro laughed and translated the compliment for the benefit of the old woman. Her bright black eyes turned to Lafe and a sudden smile warmed her wrinkled face. With the privilege of old age she gave his shoulder a swift pat of approval as she turned away. It was plain that in her Lafe had won a friend for life. She had been a servant of Pedro's family for years back in Mexico—until his family was no more.

"Ef Señor Hason stays with us, Maria, we get hem all fed up good and fat, eh?" laughed Pedro.

"*Sí!*" replied Maria firmly.

"I should like to stay," said Lafe, "if you can give me a job."

"Sure I geve you a job," Pedro nodded readily. "Señor Hon's a ver' good fren' of mine—and he say geve you a job."

Lafe was at the point where any sort of job was good luck, for it meant reprieve from hunger and a chance to get his bearings.

"The Paloma ver' poor mine." Your Mexican is not a bad bargainer. "I cannot pay mooch. How mooch señor work for?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Keep the books, maybe?"

Lafe nodded. "Yes, and I can do pretty nearly every sort of work, after I learn how."

"At first, you keep the books—the time the men go to work and when they quit, and weigh the ore, and see the men do not cheat."

"How many men are working for you?"

"Nine, ten, sometimes maybe more. I pay you three pesos a day, maybe?"

"All right." Lafe was in no mood for bargaining.

The supper was interrupted by a bullish voice outside. "Hello, hello!"

Pedro jumped up with astonishing lightness for a big man, and his hand went to his hip. A look of distrust and antagonism came into the dark face. He went to the kitchen door and stepped outside. Lafe, thinking it might be intruding to follow, kept his seat.

He heard the bullish voice outside saying domineeringly, "My name is Muck. I'm a deputy sheriff. I came to search your shindig for stolen goods."

"There are no stolen goods, señor." The Mexican's voice was polite, but Lafe felt the hate in it.

"That's for me to say," Muck snarled.

"I do not know about your law, señor." Pedro's tone was growing dangerous. "But my mine, et belong to me. I do not want——"

"Hell!" broke out Muck. "Didn't I tell you I'm an officer! I go where I damned please."

Lafe stepped outside. The two men stood facing each other. He saw by the dim starlight, the big, bullying deputy sheriff had his hand on his gun; and Pedro's fingers were touching the handle of a revolver.

"I beg your pardon," Jason stepped forward. "Just what is the trouble?"

Muck was surprised and obviously upset by the presence of an American as witness to what he had started to do.

"Why, there's been a lot of stealin' up this gulch." He tried to say plausibly. "I'm a deputy sheriff hunting for the stuff. They say this hole in the ground ain't for ore, but to hide stuff in."

"You have a search warrant?" said Jason.

"Sure."

"Let's see it."

"What in hell have you got to do with it?" snarled Muck.

"I am the timekeeper and bookkeeper for the La Paloma Mine," Jason spoke coldly, "and I look after the legal end of Señor Mascajon's business."

"Damn it, I don't need a search warrant. All I need is a searchlight."

"Y-e-s," drawled Jason, now sure that Muck was not really on any legal mission, "it *is* necessary to have a search warrant."

This complication had not entered into the visitor's thick head. And Muck had no fancy to go to jail even in the service of Blucker.

"I tell you what'll happen to you," he snarled at Lafe, "you'll get a shot in the back one of these nights."

"That is probably where you would shoot," agreed Lafe.

As the big bullying deputy slumped off down the steep slope, his feet scuffing among the stones, Pedro turned to Lafe, grabbed his hand and shook it over and over. "Señor Hason es employ at five pesos a day."

Chapter IV

LAFE SAVES A JOB

DEVIL'S GULCH was two miles from Bingham. Jason went back to town that night and returned to the Paloma mine early next morning. The only man on the job so early was a slender young fellow scarcely more than a boy, sitting out in the sun at the mouth of the mine, with a notebook and pencil in hand.

"Good morning," Lafe nodded to the young chap. "Mascajon has not come out yet?"

"No," replied the youth. "But he'll be out directly. He is usually on the job ahead of the miners."

"You work here?" Jason noticed the youth's face was so thin the cheek bones showed through the skin, and his large blue eyes had a timid, wistful look in them.

"Yes," with a touch of pride in the tone, "I'm the timekeeper."

Lafe was disturbed. That was the job Pedro had promised him. Did he mean to fire this young fellow?

"Where did you come from?" Jason asked.

"I live in Provo Canyon, about sixty miles east of here. Are you going to work here?"

"Supposed to," replied Lafe.

"My name's Amos Tilbury," said the youth. "I've only been here a week. And I never worked out before."

"My name is Lafe Jason. I'm from Missouri, and this is my first try at mining, too."

Pedro Mascajon had come from the door of his house and stopped in the yard to stretch. Both the young men looked toward him. Pedro was dressed in overalls, a miner's hat on his head, and was bearing a carbide lamp.

"Does he work in the tunnel himself?" asked Lafe.

"Yes," answered Tilbury, "harder than any two of them."

Pedro had approached them. "Ah, good morning, Señor Hason. You ver' prompt. I like that." Then with a complete change of tone and manner, he turned on young Tilbury and said with a careless wave of the arm, "You fired. You too light—no good."

Lafe saw the stricken look in the large blue eyes. The boy was too young and slender for heavy work in the mine.

"Señor," Lafe spoke quietly, "show me how far your mine extends—the boundary line of your claim, I mean." As they walked out of hearing Jason said, "Señor, I think that boy might be very useful in helping me. I could teach him to survey and could use him as a messenger to do errands for us. How much do you pay him?"

"Three pesos."

"Pay him two, and I will pay him a dollar of my wages."

"Ver' well, señor." Pedro was not at all convinced, but he remembered the services of Señor 'Hason' the night before.

Except Amos and a Swede miner, all the rest of the mine workers were Mexicans. Lafe spent the day studying the mine or watching their method of work. And he made a good impression on the men. That evening he and Amos went down the gulch together to Bingham.

"I'm thin," said the youth apologetically, "but I'm stronger than they think. I could work in the mine if they'd let me."

"All right," said Lafe, "I'll get you a

chance to try your hand at the drills."

In front of a weather beaten old frame house on the side of the canyon above the road, Amos stopped. "Here's where I stay."

"I've got to hunt a room for myself," said Jason.

Amos hesitated a moment, and then said shyly, "I've a room with a stove. It's not a very good room, but if you will share it, I'd be glad."

"That'll be fine." Lafe jumped at the chance. "I'll pay half the rent and half the food, and we'll take turns about cooking."

The room was much better than the one he had the night before. It had two windows, a bed and a cot.

"I brought the cot and the bedding with me from the farm," Amos explained. "I didn't know whether I could get a job and afford a room; but I thought if I had a bed I could find some place to sleep. My sister came down with me, and helped me get fixed up."

"You think a lot of your sister," remarked Lafe.

"She's the best girl in the world, and the smartest," said Amos warmly.

"I haven't any brothers or sisters," said Lafe.

"You can have some of mine," Amos laughed, "I have forty-one."

"Forty-one!" Jason ejaculated. "Why, your father must be a——"

"Yes, we are all Mormons. My father married six wives before the law changed, and it wouldn't be right to turn them off now. My mother is the youngest. Miriam and I are the only children of my mother's."

"I should think," Lafe grinned, "your father would have his hands full feeding the bunch."

"It's quite a contract," smiled Amos. "That's why I had to come down here. Father's an inventor—and it's been a sort of a drain on us, so far."

Chapter V

MR. MUCK LOOKS AROUND

WEDNESDAY morning Nevada Muck, the deputy sheriff, reappeared at the silver mine with a search warrant. Lafe was at the mouth of the tunnel sampling some ore when Muck approached. Muck blinked the left eye and the scar showed red around the edges.

"I got the warrant this time. Want to see it?" he growled.

"Yes." Lafe took the paper he handed him and read it deliberately. He did not know much about search warrants, but this seemed in legal form. It authorized the sheriff or his deputy to search the premises, including the mine of Pedro Mascajon, for stolen goods.

"All right?" There was a triumphant sneer on Muck's thick lips.

"Seems to be. Come on, I'll go with you."

"Not by a hell of a lot." Muck drew back. "You wait until you are asked."

Lafe had felt from the first that there was some hidden motive back of the deputy's moves. "You don't seem to be very well posted on law," remarked Lafe evenly. "You are new to the sheriff business, aren't you? If you knew anything about the law, you'd know that the owner of the premises or his agent must be allowed to be present at any search. You see—" he fixed Muck's ugly face with a straight, significant look—"if it was not for that, a crooked official might frame an innocent man." Lafe had got these words from a detective story, but they had their effect.

"Well, get your damned greaser then," assented Muck sullenly.

"He is away this morning. I am acting as his agent. I go with you or you don't go."

Muck was murderously angry, but he only could accede. Lafe followed at his elbow through the reaches of the mine; and the deputy made a very perfunctory show of looking into dark corners and blind passageways for stolen goods. Once he stopped where the miners were at work, and peered at the vein of ore.

"No stolen goods there," said Lafe. "Not yet."

Muck swore but moved on. He had a feeling that he was being thwarted, but he did not know what to do about it. He could not use this chance of examining the ore too openly without arousing suspicions. At the mouth of the tunnel he remarked, "Thanks for seeing me around."

"You are welcome," Lafe grinned. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Not this time, but I will."

"And possibly more," added Lafe.

For two weeks Jason saw nothing more of Muck. Lafe had become pretty well acquainted with Pedro in these two weeks. The big Mexican was courteous and generous to a friend, but violently vindictive toward those he disliked. The mere mention of Muck would almost throw him into a frenzy. Pedro always carried a gun, and Jason knew if Muck encroached too far on Pedro's self control a tragedy might result.

"Señor," he cautioned Pedro repeatedly, "if that deputy sheriff comes back, turn him over to me. Don't quarrel with him. He may not be dangerous, but he is wearing a star, and the law is dangerous."

"Ver' well," consented Pedro with reluctance.

The mine was beginning to produce. A good showing of silver ore had been uncovered. The ore was carried down to the bottom of the gulch on burros, and there loaded on a motor truck to be taken to the mill at Bingham. It was slow and expensive, but the ore assayed so rich that it would pay well even at that.

One morning as they began to load up the burrows, Jason suggested to Pedro, "We can build a chute down the side of the gulch that will drop the ore into a big hopper under which the trucks can be driven and loaded by the mere pulling of a lever. I don't believe the lumber for the chute would cost over two thousand dollars, and the work perhaps fifteen hundred more."

"You build hem," Pedro assented instantly.

By six o'clock Lafe had rounded up six men who at least claimed to be carpenters, and promised to be at the La Paloma at eight o'clock the next morning. The lumber yard also promised to have three truck loads of timber up that evening.

Lafe then hurried back to his room. It was Amos' evening to get supper, but Amos probably would not be back from the mine yet, and he would have it ready. The room was at the back of the house, and was reached by an outside stairway.

Lafe went up the steps two at a time. It was dusk and as he opened the door and stepped in, the room was so dark he had to feel for the light switch. Before he touched it, a girl sprang out of the shadows, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"It's me, Amos," the girl laughed. "Miriam."

"I'm sorry," said Lafe, "but I'm not Amos." And his fingers found the switch and snapped on the light.

"Oh! Why—why—I thought—— Isn't this my brother's room?"

"Yes," Lafe smiled. "It's all right. I'm working at the mine with your brother, and he has not got in yet."

She was blushing furiously, but there was a hint of laughter in her eyes. "I didn't know he had a roommate," she explained.

"He took me in when I needed a place to stay," said Lafe. "He has been a very good friend to me."

"Amos is the best boy in the world," she declared warmly.

Her hair was dark but not quite black, her throat white, her eyes the deep gray of soft summer rain clouds, her lips soft and full. She was slender, but almost as tall as her brother, and much more vital. When Lafe's eyes finally broke away from her, he swallowed twice and changed his right foot to his left, and began to fumble in his pocket for something to wrap around his finger. "Amos ought to be here directly," he said.

"Then I'll hurry and finish supper." She turned toward the stove. "I had it almost ready when I heard you coming."

Lafe sat down and pretended to read a book on copper mining, but his gaze stayed all the time about two inches above the top of the page. He had never seen motion so pleasant to watch as Miriam at work. She was three or four years older than Amos, and no doubt had mothered him and shielded him. And she was a Mormon!

Her embarrassment over her mistake had made them both shy and they scarcely spoke until Amos came in.

"I've got to go down town and look for Steve Johns," Lafe remarked to Amos. "I'll see you in the morning." His eyes were on Miriam, but her long lashes were pointed downward toward her plate.

"Breakfast at six," she said, "and I think, perhaps, you better knock."

And Amos wondered what his sister was smiling at as Lafe went out.

Chapter VI

Glick's Place

LAFE strolled down the long crooked street, watching the lights in windows, and the passing and repassing of drab figures of workmen coming home to supper, or setting out again on the night shift. Slatternly women crossed the street to small grocery stores, and now and again children's voices broke the dark in their play.

Presently, without much hesitancy, he entered Glick's Place for the second time. It was later, and the crowd larger than on his first visit. Lafe felt less embarrassed, but still an alien. He moved about among the shifting crowd. Over in the corner, seven men played stud poker. Lafe drifted over and leaned against the wall, just back of the Swede. It was a motley circle around the table—a Mexican, an Italian, a German, two natives of Utah, and another, half drunk boisterous, red faced fellow.

"Where's that damned Muck?" asked this blustering red faced one.

"He's out gunning for some guy," answered another.

"Who the devil is he after now?" asked the Swede.

"A greenhorn from Missouri," replied the first. "Some damned skunk who's low down enough to work for a furriner."

Lafe felt his face and neck burn, also he felt his fists clinch. It had not occurred to him that he was doing anything out of caste by working for Pedro.

"All right," said the half drunk one, "let Muck get him. Any damned scrub that'll work for a greaser ought to be shot."

Lafe moved away. He wondered if they had recognized him, and were talking for his benefit. He was angry, but with it, troubled. Did the whole camp feel that way about it? Would he be a pariah because he worked for a Mexican?

He left the poker room and curiously, almost irresistibly was drawn toward the dance hall in the rear. He stopped just inside the open archway that divided the two rooms. At one side a mechanical piano was in full blast, and a girl with a red dress and red lips and heavily powdered face and curled hair, was singing a love song. When she finished she began dancing. While two or three dozen men stood or sat around the wall.

A girl came up and took Lafe's arm. "Come on, dearie, let's dance."

Lafe felt that wild pounding in his temples, but he shook his head. "I can't dance." He drew away from her, and she turned to a miner standing beside him.

There was one woman in the room not dancing. A tall, slender, youngish woman with dark hair and brown eyes. She was better dressed than the rest, and moved with a good deal of dignity. But everybody seemed to know her, and talk with her readily. She passed around the room speaking now and then to the girls, and in passing stopped beside Lafe.

"Hello, hill billy." She smiled at him, not flirtingly, but understandingly. "I'm Tennessee Nan. I came from the hill country myself—and I can tell a man from the hills of the south as far as I can see him."

"How?" Lafe really was curious.

She drew her dark eyebrows together making a thoughtful line between her eyes. "Well, for one thing, he is awkwardly graceful; he looks shy, and acts as though he has just discovered the secret of some ancient gold mine, but will be damned before he'll tell a soul. And," she finished with another smile and a wink, "he's afraid of women. But it is they who need to be afraid of him."

Lafe laughed. He had seldom felt so at ease with a woman. What seemed more strange was that a woman here, obviously a bad woman, could talk intelligently and about ordinary things, and could smile in a friendly way.

"Hello, Nan." A man had just pushed in beside him and recognizing Lafe, added, "Well if it isn't Missouri." The newcomer was Steve Johns. "Nan," he shook his head at the tall girl, "don't try any tricks on Jason. He's as green as grass."

Lafe blushed, and felt a measure of resentment at the remark.

"Well," laughed Tennessee Nan, "he won't be long if he associates with fellows like you." She moved on.

"Nan's a great girl," remarked Johns. "She owns this place." And then in a lower tone, "By the way, I was looking for you. I heard this afternoon that Nevada Muck is laying for you. He's a

bad actor. What did you do to him?"

Lafe recited the incident, and Johns became acutely attentive. "Come on out." He led the way across the street to the Paris Café, went in, took a booth and ordered some ice cream and coffee.

"And Muck wanted to search the mine?" Johns' black eyes looked speculatively at the curtain that hung across the entrance to the booth.

Lafe nodded.

"That's funny. Muck is Blucker's man, you know." Johns picked up a spoon and tapped the edge of the table with it. "Something back of that." Then in a moment he turned to Lafe. "What has Pedro got up there—real stuff?"

"Yes," Lafe nodded.

"Is it rich?"

"I think so."

"How are you getting on with him?"

"All right, I suppose." And he told him about the proposed chute.

Johns was interested, and made Lafe sketch his plans for both the chute and the delivery box. He offered several suggestions that simplified the construction.

"Thanks," said Lafe, warmly, "those are bully suggestions."

Johns dropped into thoughtful silence. "If you put this over, Pedro will swear by what you say. Do you think he has any money?"

"Yes, I do," answered Lafe. "And he's going to have a lot of it."

Johns rubbed his temples with the fingers of his left hand. "I need money worse than the devil needs ice. If you can get Pedro to go in with us, I'll have something good to offer you."

"What is it?"

"The next time he comes up I want you to meet Joshua Waters who owns Mount Soledad, that mountain south of town. Then you'll know."

Chapter VII

Blucker Reaches Out

ADOLPH BLUCKER was by all counts the most powerful man in the Bingham district. The Pinto was the biggest copper mine in the State, employing more than two thousand men, and milling nearly ten thousand tons of ore a day. And when one thought of the Pinto, he thought of Adolph Blucker, the superintendent, and not of George Mansfield, the general manager, or Henderson Morton, the financial backer. When one wanted to sell anything to the Pinto it was Blucker he had to reach; and any individual who started a fight on the Pinto, Blucker was the man he was up against.

As superintendent, his salary was only five thousand a year, but he had many diversified interests, most of them unknown to the owners of the Pinto. He was coldly, ruthlessly ambitious. Rarely did any one ever attempt an appeal to his sympathy; and if one did, the attempt died early. A cold, silent man who knew the mining game from the bottom of the pit to the tail of the mill; a man without human consideration, and with only one end in view, to turn out copper.

From the window of his office, Blucker could see Mount Soledad. It stood out to the southwest grimly and solidly blocking the end of Bingham Canyon. Mount Soledad stood unscarred, untouched; and yet, locked within that huge granite pile of rock was more copper than all the mines of America were producing.

Blucker had told his employers, the owners of the Pinto, there was no possibility of mining that ore on account of its low grade. "No possibility!" He twisted the corner of his mouth into what, with another man, would have been a smile. "No possibility of *their* mining it!" Nevertheless, for months he had spent from two to ten hours a day with figures and experiments trying to find a key to that mountain of copper. And he was doing it not for the Pinto Mine, but for Adolph Blucker.

He had three men in the mills, experts in mining machinery; one from Germany, one from England, and one from New Jersey, all working in separate ways, trying to devise some way of handling low grade copper ore profitably. These men thought they were working for the Pinto Mine—their pay checks came from the Pinto—but they were not; they were working for Adolph Blucker, and he had laid upon them the most emphatic orders of secrecy.

In Blucker, all the usual cravings of man—for congenial friends, love for women—were turned into one fierce passion for power; power backed by the one big permanent force of money. He

had power now, but it was borrowed. Men feared him because of what he could do to them; and he could do it only through the power of the Pinto Mine. What he wanted, what, in spite of hell he was going to have, was a mine of his own; one so huge, so rich, that he could make financiers, and even governments and kingdoms come to him with their hats in their hands.

That mountain yonder was the answer. There were three steps. He had taken the first, and discovered the ore was there. Practically the whole mountain was one solid mass of low grade copper ore! The second step, a way to handle that ore profitably, was in process of solution. The third step was to acquire the mountain. That was a problem of money and Joshua Waters.

Nevada Muck entered. Blucker did not switch on the light, but turned in his chair and faced the deputy sheriff, who bulked large in the dusk. "Well?"

Muck sank squashily into a chair. "I've learned some," he said. "But there's a fellow up there that's in the way. Tenderfoot named Jason. He butted in strong the first evening I went up there. I'd have smashed him, but I thought maybe you'd not want us to get in court. And he's dogged around after me every move I've made since."

Muck fumbled on the table for something to employ his fingers. Blucker sat there, a mere silent figure of accusation.

"But I've been to the mill and I know how the stuff is running. It's rich, over a hundred dollars a ton."

"How much is there of it?"

"I got into the tunnel night before last," Muck lied, "and made a good survey of it. It looks to me," Muck warmed to his invention, "better than the Nevada Queen. And she sold for four hundred thousand."

Blucker stirred in the dusk. Four hundred thousand! He had not depended solely on Muck. The report of other spies more than corroborated this fictitious one of the deputy sheriff's. He spoke with brief finality. "The next thing is to get possession of it."

Blucker leaned forward with his elbows on the desk, and thought a moment. Then he began talking, clearly outlining the plan of procedure, so boldly, cold bloodedly, that the deputy sheriff felt his flesh creep.

JASON had left Steve Johns at the door of the café. He cut through an alley and climbed up the side of the canyon high enough to overlook the town, and sat down. He wanted to think over some of the details of the chute he would start tomorrow; and he wanted to turn over in his mind this proposition of Steve Johns.

But Lafe's mind did not linger long at a time on any of these mining problems. It kept jumping back to Miriam Tilbury, the Mormon girl. He went over in the greatest detail, and with the greatest satisfaction, her mistaking him for her brother. There was nothing she had done or said that he wished she had left out. But he wished she was not a Mormon.

Then he thought of Tennessee Nan. She had smiled at him, and laid her hand on his arm, giving it a squeeze as he left. She was not a Mormon. She was from the hills of the south as he was. He wondered if it were possible she was a good girl. Could she possibly run a place like that because she had to have money, and still remain good

He had sat there an hour, perhaps two. It had been an exciting day, but there was something in the back of his mind that was not pleasant—a dim recollection of something that had happened that was disturbing.

Oh, yes. Those men at the poker table cursing him for working for a Mexican, and their intimation that Nevada Muck was laying for him. It was disturbing.

But it was bed time, and past. He had to be up early. She had said "breakfast at six," and he must be there. He got to his feet and stood for a few moments looking down into the canyon. And then his eye turned to Mount Soledad. Silent, untouched, it stood out against the starlit sky. He wondered if it were really true, as he had been told, that the whole mountain was low grade copper ore; and would a process ever be discovered that would make mining it profitable?

Chapter VIII

STRUCK DOWN IN THE DARK

THE sun was just topping Mount Soledad next morning when Lafe knocked at the door of his and Amos' room.

"Come in," a girl's voice, busy but friendly, called.

Coffee was boiling on the stove, and bacon frying. The girl took the handle of the frying pan in her apron, and lifted it onto the hottest part of the stove. "I was just waiting," she said over her shoulder, "for you to come before I fried the eggs."

There was not much talk at breakfast, but somehow Lafe wished the meal could last all the morning. "I've got to get some more hardware before I start," he said to Amos. "You go on to the mine and get the men to carrying up that lumber."

Amos took his dinner bucket, and kissed his sister good-by. Lafe got up and took his hat from a nail and started to the door.

"Mr. Jason." The girl came across the room and stood before him, looking straight into his eyes. "I am glad," she said simply, "my brother is with you."

"So am I," he smiled. "He is a good boy."

"That is it," she said. "He is a good boy and this is a wicked camp. You'll look after him, won't you?"

"Yes," he nodded decisively.

"And if he should get sick," she added, "you will send for me?"

Again he nodded. Then with an unaccustomed daring, "And if I should get sick?"

"Have *him* send for me!" She smiled back, but her color heightened. "I'm the nurse for the whole family."

LAFE sat on the step of the Mexican's house waiting for Pedro to come back from town. Supper was ready and waiting. In spite of which Lafe was deeply depressed.

The chute had been finished at noon. They had worked a week on it, and spent a good deal of money. He had tried it out during Pedro's absence. It hadn't worked. The rock jammed, and they had to keep running along the side to shove it loose. After an hour's trial which had given much trouble, a heavy chunk of rock had skidded too clear and too straight, and landed on the loading hopper at the bottom with such force that it knocked a hole in it.

At two o'clock Jason had given it up as a failure. He was deeply chagrined; more, he was worried. But it was not the prospect of losing his job that worried Lafe most. It was the fact that he had overlooked these now obvious drawbacks to the thing. What was the use of having a head at all if you could not think out a thing before you did it, and *know* whether it would work or not. He had left the mine and wandered about the side of the gulch all afternoon thinking over it.

Just before sundown a solution of the difficulty came to him. It was simple and could not help but work. But it was expensive. He could not wait until morning to report to Pedro the failure, and endeavor to persuade him to spend a few thousand more to make it work. Pedro was coming. Half way up the side of the gulch Jason could recognize him by his bulk, and the jaunty swing of his body.

"Ah, did she work?" he called gaily as he saw Jason on the doorstep.

"No," replied Jason, "it did not work."

"No?" There was a sudden change of tone. "But you say he work. You say 'I am an engineer.'"

"I know I did, Pedro, but I was a darn' fool. The thing doesn't work. I'll tell you why."

Maria came to the door and announced that supper was waiting. Pedro's hospitality overcame his rising wrath over the failure, and he invited Lafe to come in and eat with them. Jason accepted quickly, it would be his best chance to convince Pedro while under the bonds of hospitality.

"You see," he explained as they sat at supper, "the rock catches against the side and jams. Now there is one way to remedy that, but it will cost more money."

"More money!" Pedro grew sullen. "And still maybe not work."

"A mine, rich like yours," said Lafe, "is worth spending money on. You can lose two or three times and still be ahead if the thing works at last. Here is the plan." Lafe leaned forward eagerly and marked on the oilcloth with the tine of the fork. "We'll get a heavy belt the width of the chute, and run it over a wheel at each end. Every few feet we'll have a cross piece fastened to the belt. The wheel at the upper end will have a break. We run the ore out of the shaft, dump a bucket of it on the

belt, and the cross catch holds it there. The weight starts the belt but the break keeps it from going too fast. The belt slips along the bottom of the chute, and we can load all the ore we want, but load it a bucket at a time so it will be distributed along the belt."

"*Si, si,*" Pedro exclaimed brightly, "Et will work!"

It was nine o'clock when Lafe climbed the outside stairs to his room. He paused on the top step to look over the town. He felt the spring wind in his face, and something stirred in him that made an ache of longing—for what, he did not know.

A groan from inside the room startled him. He sprang quickly to the door, and pulled it open, switching on the light as he entered.

"Amos!" he exclaimed, and ran across the room to where the youth lay sprawled across the couch, his face covered with blood, his arm hanging over the edge. "Amos! What is the matter?" he asked, frightened.

"Hurt," mumbled the boy.

He had a bad gash at the edge of his hair above the temples, and an ugly bruise on the jaw. And there were many heavy blue marks across the back of his head.

"What happened, Amos?"

"Men—three or four—jumped me at the bottom of the—stairs. Said I was working for—damned greaser—they'd kill me—next time."

"The skunks!" cried Lafe.

He hurriedly got a doctor. After the physician had made an examination, and had bandaged the wounds, Lafe followed him out on the steps. "Is he badly hurt?"

"Rather badly bruised, but not dangerously, I think." The doctor shook his head. "He will be laid up for several weeks; and it may be even more serious."

Lafe felt in his inside pocket for a slip of paper on which Miriam had written directions for reaching her by wire if needed.

"Will you send a telegram to this address?" He gave the doctor the paper. "It is to his sister, asking her to come at once."

Down the street a block beyond Glick's Place was a pawn-shop. There, after a brief bargaining, Lafe bought the best revolver in the shop, loaded it, and slipped it into his pocket.

He was sure it was Muck's gang that had attacked the boy—and that they had mistaken Amos in the dark for Jason.

Chapter IX

A WARNING—AND SUSPENSE

PERSONAL conflict was nothing new to Jason. In the remote hill country in which he grew up, court seldom met without one to five murder cases on the docket. Long bladed knives, and heavily loaded guns were common equipment in the hill cabins, though his own youth had been spent most peaceably; there never having arisen occasion for a serious conflict with anyone.

But now he felt a dangerous, smoldering rage for the thugs who had beaten up his room-mate. Here again he had failed, for he had promised Amos' sister he would take faithful care of the boy.

The more he thought of it, the surer he was the thugs were not after him simply because he worked for a Mexican. There was something else back of it, and that something else was the Paloma silver mine. Somebody had started in to get Pedro's mine, and as a first step they intended to remove Jason.

Now, Lafe loved life, and he had almost a horror of being physically maimed. Yet he knew no amount of reasoning, no prudence could persuade him to quit Pedro Mascajon under threat. He knew, too, he could not possibly desert a man who had been kind to him just when he needed help most.

The third evening after the attack on Amos, Lafe was returning from the mine early. He was swinging along down the path at an eager stride. Miriam should have arrived today, and he would find her in the room caring for her brother. And the chute with the belt and the wheels *worked!* The thing had been finished that afternoon. Pedro had been so greatly pleased, he had embraced Lafe in his enthusiasm.

Lafe had told Pedro three days before of the attack on Amos, and had warned him of efforts to get his mine; but Pedro had merely bared his teeth and gestured at his gun. He would "keel" any man who tried to get his mine.

Near the end of the path where the gulch ran into Bingham Canyon, Lafe met the fattish young man of his earlier acquaintance, Jerrold Dever.

"Hello, hello!" said Dever, offering his hand. "How is our well known friend?"

"Fine as frawg hair," replied Jason, grinning.

"I was coming up to see you," said Dever. He took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief. "I have a friend, a millionaire from the East, who wants to buy the Paloma Mine."

"I doubt if Mascajon will sell it."

"He must—simply must." Dever slipped closer to Lafe, and tapped his chest with the knuckle of his forefinger. "Take this from me as a friend, and keep it under your skull bone; they are going to run that Mex out of the country and grab his mine. He better sell—and sell quick!"

"To begin with," replied Lafe, "I doubt if Pedro will run."

"They'll get him if he don't." Dever waggled his head ominously. "And you, too, if you hang around there. That is what I came to see you about. I saw Steve Johns this morning, and he says, 'Jerry, old boy, we got to get our friend Jason out of that mine; and I leave the job to you.'"

Lafe shook his head decisively. "It's friendly of you to take an interest, but I can't lie down on the job."

Dever turned and walked down the canyon and into town with Lafe. "You know," he said in a low tone as they passed Glick's Place, "I'm doing this to let these damned rats know you are a friend of mine. The skunks have been telling around what they are going to do to you; but I want them to know that if they do anything to a friend of mine, they have got to answer to Jerrold Dever.

"Oh, by the way," he added, as Lafe turned with considerable hurry up the alley toward his rooming house, "Steve Johns told me to tell you that Joshua Waters is in town, and he wants you to meet me and him at the Paris Café at eight o'clock."

"All right," Lafe was already starting up the alley, "I'll be there."

Lafe's hand lingered on the doorknob a moment without turning it. There were voices inside the room. Miriam and her brother were in an argument.

"I am going to take you home *just as soon* as you are able to travel." It was the girl's voice.

"Oh, no you're not." The lad's reply was both pleading and defiant. "He's in danger and I won't leave him."

"Hello," Lafe swung open the door and called out brightly, "what's all the row about?"

Miriam's face flushed, but her smooth lips pressed together determinedly. "I was just telling my brother that he must go home with me as soon as he can travel."

Amos' eyes looked up appealingly at Lafe from the bed.

"And right you are," he nodded to Miriam, and walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed, and smiled at the bandaged head. "I'll help you pack him off as soon as he is able to hoe potatoes."

"But, Jason," Amos' right hand came from under the cover and clutched Lafe's arm, "I won't——"

"Sh-h," Lafe warned.

He got up and went across the room to where Miriam was lighting the gas in the stove to prepare supper. She looked at Lafe gratefully as he stood before her. He had never seen eyes like hers, so clear, so frank. And yet, the deeper one looked into them the more uncertain he was of what were the thoughts far back of them.

"Thank you for your kindness to Amos—and thank you for sending for me."

"No thanks due me." He shook his head. "It was on account of me that he got hurt. The thugs thought they were attacking me."

"But why should they want to attack you?" The eyes widened, the pupils distending.

He shook his head. "I don't know—exactly. But I think it's something about the Paloma mine."

"Is it somebody who wants it?"

"Perhaps."

"Why don't you find out?"

"I am going to," he replied. "But there are lots of people who would want it."

"Is the mine rich?" she asked.

"Yes, very. Even as it is running

now, Pedro is clearing two hundred dollars a day."

She filled the teakettle under the faucet, and set it on the gas to boil. "I can't understand," she remarked, "why men fight and kill each other over money."

"I can," said Lafe. And then, after a little pause, "You can stay and look after Amos a while, can't you?"

"Yes, until he is ready to go home."

"I can get a room across the hall, and I'll get you a bell so if you need anything in the night you can ring."

"But you are going to eat here?" She appeared disappointed.

"I hope so."

Her eyes slipped away, and she turned to the boiling kettle. "Oh, yes," she recalled, "I washed some things for you today. I was just washing your gloves when you came in." The dish pan, still foamy with soapsuds, sat on the drain board of the sink.

"Thanks very much. I'll need them in the morning, but I never thought of them needing washing." Amos, when working about the mine testing ore and breaking up samples, wore cotton gloves. He had crossed over to the washing and started to take the gloves out of the water. "You must let me do this," he said. "I can't have you washing for me, too."

His hand stopped before it plunged into the water. He had caught a glint in the soapsuds. That seemed queer. He wondered what it meant. He carried the pan to the window for a better light. There were particles of something buoyed up by the soapsuds. It was not silver. He wondered what it was. He took a saucer and skimmed off some of the suds, and set the saucer on the window sill.

"Leave it there until breakfast," he said, "I want to see what is in those suds."

She was curious but asked no questions.

Chapter X

Mr. Waters of Soledad

LAFE met Steve Johns and Jerrold Dever at the Paris Café.

"Before we go up to the hotel," said Steve, "I want to tell you a little about Joshua Waters.

"One day, nearly forty years ago, he got off the train at Salt Lake City wearing a Prince Albert coat and a high silk hat. His immaculate clothes and his military bearing attracted a great deal of attention.

"He deposited in the bank, forty thousand dollars in gold, and opened an office for the purpose of dealing in mining properties. He knew practically nothing of mines himself, but he employed two very competent mining engineers, and from the first his ventures were successful. He bought a silver mining claim in Nevada for ten thousand, spent a few thousand for development, and sold it for eighty-six thousand dollars.

"For twenty years he bought and sold leases, opened up new prospects, and reorganized going mines. In that time he must have made close to a million dollars. Then he took a plunger in a gold mine in Alaska and lost about half a million. Two other gold claims, one in Nevada and one in southern Utah turned out badly.

"About that time copper mining began to show promising returns in Utah. Waters set his engineers to prospecting in Bingham Canyon. A superficial boring at the foot of Mount Soledad showed copper ore of two and a half per cent.

"Waters' imagination caught fire. Without awaiting a complete report, he jumped in and bought the whole mountain for $400,000.

"The price cleaned him out, but he felt sure of getting all the capital he wanted. However, a more thorough examination showed that while practically the whole mountain contained copper ore, it is very low grade, averaging little above one per cent.

"At that time the handling of such low grade ore at a profit was impossible. And no way has since been devised. To get a profit out of such ore requires mining on a huger scale than ever attempted before and some milling process more economical than any yet discovered. Waters spent the remainder of his fortune on attempts to unlock that mountain of copper. Mount Soledad had become an obsession with him.

"For ten or fifteen years he has been practically broke, living on a small rental from some property his wife owned

back East. But he still has faith in Mount Soledad and holds onto it fiercely. He has been offered as much as three hundred thousand dollars for the claim, but scorns it. I doubt if he would sell outright for a million.

"Another thing. Although he swears like the tent boss in a circus, and drinks when he can get it, and never goes to church, yet he claims to be a Methodist, and is very bitter against the Mormons. He fights them at every election in Salt Lake City; and was influential in getting Congress to pass the bill prohibiting polygamy. He was so bitter against the Mormons that when his only daughter married a member of that church, he not only disowned her, but has never spoken her name since.

"I'm telling you all this," finished Johns, "because for three years I have been working on a process for milling lowgrade copper ore, and I think I have discovered it. But it will take twenty, maybe thirty thousand dollars to build an experimental mill and try it out.

"That is the proposition I am figuring on you putting over with Pedro. But before we build the mill we must obtain an interest in Mount Soledad; for if my process works, that mountain will be worth millions—and we want to share it.

"I am also telling you all this about Joshua Waters, because the old man came from somewhere in the South himself, and Jerry and I think you may be just the fellow to convince him."

"He sounds interesting," said Lafe. "I'd like to meet him."

"Come on." And Steve Johns led the way to the Copper Hotel.

Joshua Waters arose as the three young men entered the room. He was tall, at least an inch taller than Jason who was a trifle over six feet, and although over seventy he was still straight, save for a slight bend of shoulders that seemed to have carried their load almost to the limit of utter weariness. He still wore a Prince Albert coat that came nearly to his knees, and his clothes were brushed and pressed with great care, although there was a suspicion of shininess about the elbows.

As Lafe shook hands with him, their eyes met. Joshua Waters' were a fierce, fighting blue. Jason's warm, reflective brown. The old man's hair was white, but still thick about his head.

From the first touch of their hands, Lafe liked Joshua Waters. With Waters, as with most men who dream large, money was of secondary importance. The big thing was to do a big job successfully. Lafe instinctively knew that with Joshua Waters the great thing with him was to prove to the world that his judgment was right when he bought Mount Soledad.

"You have been in Utah a long time, Mr. Waters," Lafe remarked, after they were seated. "I suppose Salt Lake was not much of a city when you came."

"Well," hesitated the old man, "considerable of a town—and as full of Mormons as a dog is of fleas."

"I was talking with an old Mormon the other day," said Lafe, ignoring a violent warning signal from Steve Johns, "and he told me of some of their early struggles.

"He said that when Brigham Young and his band of 145 came to the summit of the Wasatch Range on July the 24th, 1847, and looked down on the valley of the Great Salt Lake, it was as desolate and barren a desert as the eye ever beheld. And it took many years of the hardest labor and the most patient endurance to make of it the garden of green fields, and fruitful orchards one sees today."

"Oh, yes," Joshua Waters shrugged, "but pioneers don't deserve any special credit for enduring hardships. They couldn't do anything else."

"But they must have believed in their religion, or they would not have stuck to it like they have."

"Believing a thing doesn't make it so," retorted Waters. "If it did, snakes, monkeys and golden calves would all be gods."

"Who was first to discover mineral in Bingham Canyon?" Jerry Dever, like Steve Johns, was uneasy at the drift of the conversation.

"Brigham Young and most of the early leaders of the Church discouraged mining," replied the old man, a reminiscent light in his face. "They didn't want the Gentiles to come swarming in on them."

"That was natural," said Lafe. "They were interested in founding a church and a state, and not in getting rich."

"They were interested in a lot of damn' fool ideas," snorted Waters.

"Bingham Canyon in the early days contained the best timber near Salt Lake. There were red pine trees here, three feet in diameter. In the fall of 1863, George B. Ogilvie accidentally discovered some fragments of lead ore in the canyon, and took them to Fort Douglas where a company of United States troops were stationed. These samples were shown to Colonel Connor in command of the troops. On September 17th of the same year, the discovery was located and named the Jordan Lode. That was the first mining location made in Utah—the beginning of a stream of mineral wealth that has grown so rich it staggers the mind. Other discoveries followed—gold, silver and copper.

"Now gold and silver are good for ornament and barter, but copper is good for every day use. It is one of the most ancient and serviceable of all the metals. Nations now dead, and their palaces now covered with dust, knew a hundred uses of copper. And today, everywhere in the world, in the remotest corner of Africa or South America or Asia, wherever a pioneer of power or of transportation or communication has gone, you see stretched the whispering wires of men's thought—copper!

"Think of it, young man!" Joshua Waters got to his feet and his blue eyes filled with the light of a fierce prophet. "Power, transportation, communication, the three greatest forces of modern life, all dependent upon copper—copper instruments and strings of copper wire!

"Out there in that mountain," and he pointed through the window at the dark outline of Mount Soledad, "are millions and millions of pounds of copper. Because it is hard to get, because there is only one or two per cent. of that rock, copper, do you think the world is going to let it stay locked up in that porphyry? No—and mark my word—some day the copper in that mountain will sell for more than all the gold California has ever produced!"

For a moment the three young men sat in silence, awed by the fervor of Joshua Waters.

"The one thing that has been lacking," said Steve Johns at last, "is a method of mining and a process of milling that will make this low grade ore profitable. And I think I have discovered it."

He began in a clear, convincing tone to lay out his plans, and in his way became as enthusiastic as Joshua Waters. "Now, what I propose," Steve finished, "is this: to form a company with Lafe Jason here who knows something of mining, and Jerry Dever who is a good promoter, and perhaps one other. The object of this company is to open up a body of ore at Mount Soledad and to build an experimental mill to prove my theory is correct. Once we do that, millions of capital will be available."

"My idea," said Dever, "is to organize a company with a capital of $2,000,000. We to have 40 per cent. of the stock and Mr. Waters sixty per cent. We to bear all the expenses of building the mill and opening the mine. And if we fail, it all reverts to Mr. Waters."

Joshua Waters thought for a long time while Steve Johns fairly squirmed in his chair. And then: "I like you young men, and have confidence in you," he said. "If you will raise $50,000 and give me $10,000 of it outright, and 60 per cent. of the stock, and spend the rest on opening up a mine and building a mill, I will do it."

"All right." Johns was obviously delighted with this offer. He got up and held out his hand to the old man. Dever and Lafe also shook hands with Waters, and then the three went out down into the street.

"Now," said Steve, "we've got to get busy. We simply must raise that $50,000 and get Joshua Waters signed on the dotted line before it is eternally too late. And the only ready money in sight is—Pedro Mascajon's. Jason—" Johns turned on him and gripped his arm with tense fingers—"if you can get Pedro to go in with us and put up $50,000 we'll split this stock four ways. And by all the gods of the hills, I swear we'll work this thing out successfully!"

"I'll talk to Pedro about it tomorrow," promised Jason. His head was in a whirl. Things had always come so hard with him that it seemed fantastic to imagine that he had just accidentally dropped into a chance for a fortune.

"Let's go into Glick's," suggested Dever, "and celebrate."

Without giving Lafe time to object, they both caught him by his arms and marched abreast in Glick's Place and lined up at the bar.

Tennessee Nan saw them and crossed

the room and shook hands with them.

She stood chatting with Johns a few moments, then, turning to Lafe, gave her head a short, quick nod, "I want to see you a few minutes."

Lafe followed across the dance floor, his face and neck and hands growing red as blood. Tennessee Nan entered one of the small rooms that opened off the dance hall. He followed, and she closed the door.

"Sit down," she said coolly. She took another chair and lit a cigarette.

"You know," Nan looked at him speculatively out of half closed eyes, "I've liked you from the first time I saw you. You are kind—and clean. And—in this place I learn a lot. I guess I know about all the secret, dirty plotting that goes on in Bingham. And I heard something today I want you to know.

"There is a powerful man here who wants Pedro's mine. He intends to kill the Mexican outright, or run him out of the country. And if you do not get out of the way, he'll kill you, too. He's got a gang—Nevada Muck at the head of it—laying for you."

She puffed slowly at the cigarette, watching him from half closed lids. And after a little pause Lafe's eyes met hers.

"I don't know what I can do about it," he said deliberately.

"You can quit working for Pedro and get a job at the Pinto."

"There is not enough money in the Pinto to hire me to work for that damned Blucker!" Jason flared hotly.

"Then you can leave the camp."

"I've come to stay."

"But, I tell you," she said emphatically, "they'll kill you inside of two weeks."

"Maybe." He shut his jaw. "And maybe not. Anyway, they'll know where to find me!"

(*Part II of* "MANACLED MILLIONS" *appears next issue*)

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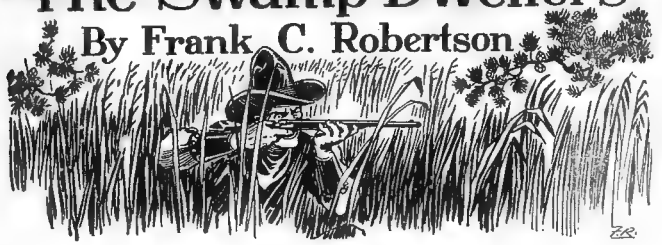


Author of "The Dry Range Deadline," etc.

A butchered calf on the open range is a sign of dire trouble. One such riled Sad Sam, so that two strangers who stepped out of the woods met a brief and most unpleasant reception. And it soon took all of Sam's natural coolness to right the consequences of that encounter.

A LOOK of mingled anger and disgust overspread the long but good natured visage of Sad Sam Morgan as he pulled old Buck to a standstill and gazed down at the front quarters of a slaughtered calf. Then, though seeming to look only at the calf, his keen gray eyes darted from side to side of the brushy canyon. He was well aware that if whoever had done the butchering still lingered in the vicinity any overt act on his part very likely would call forth a bullet. Having no disposition to bring on hostilities until he was in a position to keep up his end he made his inspection extremely discreet.

Range butchering was strictly taboo in this country, even if one happened to own the animal he was butchering. Such was the custom, and such was the law. It needed no range detective to tell that this butcher did not own the calf or such wanton waste would not have been practiced. The front quarters of a veal as well as the hide were worth good money.

A closer view showed that the calf had been dead several hours, and as nothing untoward had happened Sam felt safe in getting down and turning over the hide. The brand was that of an outfit not his own, but that was a mere trivial detail. With a knowledge born of long experience he knew that such a practice was seldom an isolated instance, for with a cattle thief success in one venture usually presaged a desire to operate on a larger scale.

This particular section of range was ridden seldom. It lay on the northern slope of a long haystack mountain whose other side dropped away in a steep rocky pitch over which cattle would not travel, thus presenting a natural barrier at that end of the range. Also, being covered with timber, the punchers found it useless to ride there except at roundup time.

The reason Sad Sam happened to be up there was a characteristic one. A dry farmer who had turned one lonesome milch cow on the range was expecting her to calve, and needing milk he had asked Sad Sam to find and bring her in. The cow had been seen last in Mill Creek Canyon, and Sam, being nothing if not accommodating, was using his few spare hours in a search the sole reward of which if he was successful would be a curt, "much obliged."

He mounted his horse and rode slowly on down the canyon. No one could have guessed the degree of irritation he felt, nor would a casual observer have thought that the tall, angular horseman was paying any attention whatever to his surroundings; but there was little that escaped his observation. The butchered calf had been killed on a grass carpeted meadow surrounded by willows, where even a shod horse would leave no tracks. But he knew there had

been no tracks going up the canyon and so he felt that by all the laws of reason and logic he should find some going down.

A short distance below, the grassy meadow ended in a ten acre swamp that was thickly covered with willows, birch, and tag elders. A tangled mat of rank grass choked the brush roots and emerged above the slimy water in the open spaces; but no stock ever ventured there because of its treacherous nature. All around the outside the surface of the swamp was soft as a sponge, and though there was a well defined trail around the edge it was apparent that no animal ever had set foot upon the bog.

It was at the bottom of this swamp where Sam hoped to find trace of the calf killer. He was doomed to disappointment. In the dry, dusty trail down the canyon was not a track fresher than two days; wagon, or horse, or man.

In gloomy mystification he stopped and pondered. Whoever had killed the calf had not gone up or down with a horse or rig. That was certain. He might have gone slaunchway of the mountain, but if so he had chosen a most laborious route. That left just two alternatives. Either the fellow still was concealed in the brush, or he had lugged half of a two hundred pound calf on his back for a couple of miles and done it so trickily that he had left no tracks.

To go back and search the brush was no part of Sam's plan. Indeed he had no plan. To go poking back now was surely to invite a bullet if he had really surprised the butcher before he could get out of the canyon. The best thing to do, he decided regretfully, was to amble back to camp and have supper.

This was not the first thing that had gone wrong with the melancholy puncher. Cal Yearian, his one top hand assistant, had been taken to the ranch to help hay, and the two irresponsible kids, Teddy Gleason and Chet Williams, who had been left to help him had not been sober for a week, and were far more of a hindrance than a help. Where they obtained their supply of moonshine he neither knew nor cared; but this calf killing incident, coming on top of his other accumulated troubles brought him to a point where he felt that patience was ceasing to be a virtue. It was about time, he decided, for somebody to be brought down to pegs and parsley.

His first idea was to raise particular Cain with the two boys in the manner of his friend Cal Yearian; but he realized instantly that he could not get away with it on account of his reputation for chronic good nature. Fiery tempered Cal could tell the boys to sober up and get to work or get off the outfit, and they would go to work. But if he undertook to tell them the same thing in the same manner they would think he was joking; and when they did become convinced that he was serious they politely would saddle their private horses and ride away to town. He knew only too well just how scarce men were at that season of the year.

Being a mild mannered man, and one who made a hobby of attending strictly to his own business he had not bothered with moonshiners or bootleggers. As he was not in the market for their wares they had let him alone, and all seemed peaceful enough. But now the incident of the butchered calf brought home to him the fact that certain bootleggers were deliberately keeping his helpers intoxicated when he needed them badly; and gradually his anger turned against them as much as against the veal thief.

A couple of miles below the swamp was the end of the canyon, and here a wagon road crossed the trail Sam was on. His eyes widened with interest as he saw the fresh tracks left by an automobile. Immediately another solution of the calf killing occurred to him. The people in the car were probably a party of sportsmen from the city and they, finding their luck bad at prairie chicken shooting, had resolved to compensate themselves with a "slow elk." In that event it was easy to understand why they might have carried the veal all that distance on foot without once coming near the trail. He studiously began to note the car tracks to see if that machine had stopped anywhere near the mouth of the canyon.

For a quarter of a mile he followed the tracks and then a look, as near one of gloating triumph as his melancholy features could encompass, came over his face. Right beside the road stood the car!

"Prob'ly they figgered it was a sort of a joke, Buck, an' we ain't a goin' t' git real mean over one dogey calf, but there

can't be no harm in givin' 'em a hell of a scare," he remarked to his horse.

He rode close alongside the touring car and leaned over to peer under the top. A tarpaulin was flung over several bulky objects in the back seat, and to make sure that the beef was there he felt it necessary to dismount. In event that it was there he intended to wait for the sportsmen and make them transport the veal to his own camp, and pay him the value of the calf which he would transfer to the owner the first time he should meet him. Several witty things to say to the men occurred to him and he grinned in anticipation.

The grin suddenly faded from his face and he paused in a most awkward position with his heel over the horse's hip. For at precisely that moment two men stepped out of the brush on the other side of the car and one glance at their grim, heavy faces convinced Sam that they were not the kind of men it would be healthy to say witty things to under the circumstances.

In place of the shot-guns loaded with bird shot which he expected to see, each wore a heavy businesslike revolver at his hip.

"Git away from that car there, you," roared the heavier of the two men. And Sad Sam, taken completely by surprise, involuntarily righted himself in the saddle and swung old Buck away.

"What's the big idee in snoopin' in our car?" the same speaker demanded as they came closer. One of them moved to the front of the car, the other to the back. Their intentions could not be mistaken, and Sad Sam was in no position to show defiance.

A slow, goodnatured grin of defeat passed over Sam's face—a grin that was usually disarming to the hostilely inclined, but it failed to placate these men. "Well, gents," he drawled, "most chicken hunters from town usually have a bottle or so in their car, an' bein' thirsty—"

"I reckon you're not dry to speak of," one of the men sneered. He stepped close to old Buck and reached out as though to rest his hand on the horse's hip; but instead his fingers groped toward the slicker roll tied behind Sam's saddle.

Ordinarily Sad Sam would have made no objection to the familiarity, but his cumulative troubles had worn his patience to the breaking point. Old Buck was famous the range over as a cutting out horse that could turn on a dime and get under way while a watch was ticking once, and suddenly Sam neckreined his pet and touched him with the spurs. Old Buck whirled so suddenly and so violently that his rump collided with the man, knocking him spinning for a rod before the fellow tripped and fell headlong.

The same second the horse completed the turn and was facing both men. Sad Sam's gun was in his hand as though by legerdemain, its cold muzzle fixed unblinkingly upon the man still on his feet, though the tall puncher was ready to swing it to the other man at the first awkward move the fellow should make.

"Now turn down that tarp an' le's have a look at yore stuff," Sam commanded forcibly.

With an angry gesture the man on his feet yanked the tarpaulin out of the car and exposed a grub box, a suitcase, and a bed roll. But there was no half a veal. Sad Sam's eyes bulged with wonder and disappointment. In his dumbfounded condition he would have been an easy victim for the two men had they but guessed a measure of his astonishment. He had never doubted that the veal would be revealed.

"Well, yuh damn bootlegger, yuh see anything yuh want?" the man by the car demanded sardonically.

"No, I don't," Sam replied in what was for him a remarkably sharp tone, "but you birds pile into that gas buggy an' git movin' down the road—an' don't never let me see yuh in these parts again or I'll shore puncture yore carcasses." They had tricked him out of the incriminating evidence some way, but it had not abated his intention to give them a scare. To make it complete he fired a couple of shots, one on each side of the car as it rolled away, after the men had hastily tumbled into the front seat and started the engine.

Then, feeling somewhat relieved in spirit over the favorable outcome of what had threatened to be a dangerous and humiliating episode, he rode on to camp.

THE affair had come up so unexpectedly, and the events had followed each other so swiftly that Sam, whose thoughts were apt to be

deep rather than swift, had overlooked completely another possibility concerning the men until he was nearly to camp. Then it occurred to him that the two tough looking hombres were very likely the bootleggers who were keeping his helpers supplied. The more he thought about it the more certain he became. That would explain why they carried revolvers instead of shotguns. He felt that if he had succeeded in cutting off the source of his assistant's supply of booze as well as putting a stop to an incipient outbreak of cattle killing, that he had put in a most profitable afternoon.

The two boys had not yet returned to camp, nor did they put in an appearance that night; but Sam was philosophically able to forgive them. When they did get over their jamboree, he thought they would be all the more anxious to make amends because of his tolerance.

The next morning he rode the south line of the range without adventure and returned to camp shortly before noon, hoping that Ted and Chet would be there at last. With a frown he realized that the youngsters had been there and gone. The cavvy had just been turned out of the corral; the boys' sweat-covered horses were among them. Two fancy town horses were missing. That meant that the protracted spree was not yet ended. Sam's face assumed the lugubrious expression which gave him his cognomen, but he was not as grief-stricken as he appeared. He still had faith in his philosophy of tolerance.

He had just finished eating when a cloud of dust up the trail toward Mill Creek attracted his attention. It was moving fast; presently he was able to discern that it was caused by two riders. Soon those riders materialized from the dust enough for him to recognize his helpers.

For all his lamblike disposition there was one thing which Sad Sam could not abide—needless abuse of horses. To run a horse a short distance after a refractory cow, to escape from a prairie fire or similar life endangering things was permissible, but to run a horse till he was foaming with lather for no other reason than to work off an excess of youthful or proof spirits, was too much. He arose in wrath and hastened toward the corral, burning words of scathing sarcasm hovering on his tongue's end.

The words were uttered but their sweetness was wasted upon the desert air. Yelling loudly, and each waving a bottle hilariously, the boys dashed on past on a search for new adventures elsewhere.

Sad Sam perched himself upon the top rail of the corral and did some hard thinking. The two men he had seen were bootleggers and calf killers. The fact that the boys had just come from the direction of Mill Creek indicated that the bootleggers probably had a still somewhere in the canyon and were doing business there despite the severe warning he had given them. Something had to be done about it.

He never had been an informer; holding that it was all one man could do to attend properly to his own business; but here was a case where it clearly was up to him to make an exception. He had given the men fair warning, but they persisted in doing him injury by making his help worthless, and doubtless they would kill another calf at need. After all, he wondered, did he not owe some sort of civic duty which obligated him to tell the proper authorities?

He ate a solitary dinner and then saddled up old Buck and set out for Blackford, thirty miles away. He had jogged along for more than an hour, the easy gait of old Buck—which alone had caused him to ride his pet two days in succession—lulling him into a melancholy day-dream, when a sudden nervous jump of his horse jarred him rudely awake. A moment later he was thankful for old Buck's alertness, as a bullet whined through the air exactly where his breast had been a split second before.

The woods seemed suddenly alive with men. Every bush on the other side of the creek he had been about to cross disgorged them. A hurried glance told him that they were strung out down the road for a quarter of a mile. There must have been a hundred of them, and judging from their actions they were after just one individual—Sad Sam Morgan. This theory received instant confirmation.

"That's him. That's the damned skunk! I recognize both him an' his horse!" roared a stentorian voice.

Who he was, or what he was supposed

to be was an immaterial matter at the moment for as other voices took up the vengeful pack-cry of, "Kill him! Shoot him!" his one impulse was to go away from there as rapidly as possible.

Old Buck needed no urging to a magnificent retreat. He spurned the ground behind him, and his rider was hunched low in the saddle, making himself as small as his elongated frame would permit. A leaden spray was falling all about them, or going over their heads as the men in the rear fired high to avoid hitting their comrades.

Fortunately old Buck had his wind and the horses of the posse had been ridden fast. Moreover, there were few hill climbers like the old buckskin; and Sad Sam promptly deserted the road for the rolling hills and wrinkly coulees that stretched away between there and his home range. He got over the first ridge in safety and then by fast riding and cunning maneuvering he managed to get beyond bullet range. Gradually he left the posse behind until he was lost to view completely, though as he occasionally looked back from some sheltered vantage point he saw that the posse was coming on with grim determination.

He was at a loss to account for the warlike display. He was tempted to wait for them to come up and explain that there was some mistake, but recalling that they had seen him plainly and identified him positively as the man they were after he decided that it was a poor time to make explanations.

He had been heading toward the breaks of the Blackford River because the country there was rougher, but now he changed his course and bore away to the left more directly toward his own range, keeping in the bottom of a coulee and hoping that his pursuers would not notice his change of direction. Then he reached the old Mill Creek lumber road, and turning, he followed it nearly to the point where it entered the canyon. He noted that the tracks made by the automobile the day before were still visible—indeed he was not so sure but that the car had been over the road that very morning.

Suddenly old Buck's belly dropped toward the ground, he whirled and quit the earth so quick and hard that Sad Sam, expert rider that he was, was all but thrown. In a moment he gathered up his slack reins and got the horse under control though Buck still snorted wildly, and then he looked to see what had done the scaring.

From just behind a pine tree by the side of the road sprawled the head and shoulders of a man—a dead man, as Sam needed no second look to know.

Forgetful of the pursuing posse he got down, tied his horse, and approached the corpse. A bloodsoaked shirt told him that the victim had been shot in the back. He tenderly turned the man over on his back, and dropped him with an ejaculation of surprise. The dead man was one of the tough individuals with whom he had had the run-in the day before.

For a moment Sam surveyed the man contemplatively, and then, bootlegger or no, he placed the man's hat over the already blackening face and folded the arms across the breast. But as he raised the left arm he made another startling discovery. Concealed under the lapel of the man's coat was the badge of a U. S. deputy marshal!

It took Sad Sam two full minutes to recover from his amazement and thirty seconds after that to reach his horse. Instead of being bootleggers these men were officers out after lawbreakers! They had suspected him when he looked into their car and his later actions, pulling a gun on them and shooting after them was enough to convince them fully he was the man they sought. He could see that they had returned this far the night before and made camp; their cooking utensils and bed roll still lay beside the ashes of a campfire a few rods from the dead man. They had been surprised by the real bootleggers and one of them killed. Evidently the other man had escaped with the car and raised the posse which Sam had plumped into head on.

The thing was serious. Undoubtedly the man who had so positively identified him back at the creek crossing was the surviving officer. This indicated clearly that he had not seen the real killers; and so Sad Sam Morgan was caught in a net of circumstantial evidence. He had been alone at camp; there was no way to prove an alibi. If he was caught immediately with the posse in its present mood he knew that the only trial would be a certain affair under the nearest tree, and the posse was much too close for comfort.

As he saw it there was just one chance to get himself out of the mess, and that was to get the men who had done the killing. His first thought was to find his helpers and make them tell who had sold them the whisky; but that would take valuable time and he knew that they might sullenly deny all knowledge of the affair, for there was poor stuff in them and to shield themselves they would sacrifice him. He gave that up as a poor expedient.

His long angular features were screwed into a painful shape as he pondered the problem. Everything indicated that the outlaws had made their headquarters in Mill Creek. This the officers apparently did not know, and so it was the logical thing for the killers to return to their hideout and remain there until it was safe for them to leave the country.

At the mouth of Mill Creek Canyon he stopped. From there to the body of the dead man he could be tracked easily. If he turned up the canyon and failed to bag his birds, his own goose would be cooked. The posse surely would cut him off before he could get back out of the canyon. If they had not gone and his guess was correct, he risked intercepting a bullet with each step that he advanced. Yet when once resolved to a given course of action Sad Sam was a hard man to swerve. The alternatives of becoming a fugitive or standing trial with the cards stacked against him, did not appeal. He turned old Buck up the canyon.

Mill Creek Canyon was heavily timbered; the old mill which had once stood by the mouth of the canyon had used up but a fraction of the timber. It enabled him to keep under cover considerably, but it would also afford protection for the men he sought. As he mapped the lay of the canyon in his mind he decided that the hangout of the moonshiners must be in one of two pocket canyons going off to the left; one from just below the swamp, the other from just above.

He approached the first one along the side hill and wasted precious minutes investigating. Finding nothing, he crossed the separating ridge to the other one and made a similar fruitless search.

He finally reached Mill Creek again just above the swamp, and paused in perplexity. He was close to where he had found the slaughtered calf. Might it be possible, he wondered, that he had overlooked some clue?

TYING old Buck by the side of the trail, he made his way to what remained of the carcass. He wasted more time and discovered nothing. Then he set out on foot to explore the path that encircled the swamp. So far as he knew no man or critter had ever been able to get across the grayish mire that composed the outside of the swamp but, the thought suddenly occurred to him, if there should be a way to get to the middle of it, it would certainly be an ideal hiding place.

What with one thing and another he had wasted a lot of time, and then near the lower end of the swamp he again all but ran into the leaders of the posse. The thickness of the brush alone saved him, though had it not been for that he would have seen the men before he did. He rubbed his leathery cheek thoughtfully while he tried to plan his course of action. He knew the posse would divide at the lower end of the swamp, and it was doubtful if he could get back to his horse before the posse did, and even if he could there was no place to go. He was bottled up most effectually.

But something had to be done. He turned and loped awkwardly back up the trail. If he took to the side of the canyon he could not keep from being exposed part of the time and some of the posse surely would sight him. If he could just get into the swamp some way—

He observed a dead pine pole a few feet above the trail. It had been broken down long ago and the ends of the thick stubby limbs that covered it had been broken off—by passing cattle Sam opined, though that was immaterial. The thing that interested him was that it might be long enough to bridge the miry edge of the swamp to a willow bush that looked as though it might be growing on reasonably solid ground.

He picked up the pole by the butt end and shoved it across, finding that it made a better bridge than he had anticipated, and though his high heeled boots were not suitable for pole walking he made it across to the willow, edged around it, dragging the pole after him until it was

out of sight from the trail. And then he made still another startling discovery. There lay another pole almost a duplicate of the one he had used, and winding away through the brush was a dim but freshly used path. In an instant Sad Sam comprehended everything. By having a pole on either side of the mire the transit to and from the swamp could be accomplished in perfect safety. The only clue in sight was the pole which he had used, and it looked entirely too natural for anyone to think anything of it.

With comprehension came its naturally corollary, fear; and instinct caused him to swerve to one side and flatten himself to the ground. The same moment he heard the crack of a six-shooter and a bullet thudded into the soft sod not six inches from his left ribs. With a grunt he rolled over on hands and knees and hustled for deeper cover.

Evidently one of the moonshiners had been watching the trail, had seen him cross and was waiting for him to come closer before stopping his career with a bullet. His sudden drop had caused the fellow to fire hastily, and perhaps had saved his life. A few fervid though smothered curses and a couple of shots that went wild told Sam that the fellow had lost sight of him temporarily. He used the respite to conceal himself still better.

Each separate brush clump appeared to stand on a spongy knoll of its own with the slimy looking mud, water, and slough grass crowding hard against it. In making a prodigious leap from one bush to another Sad Sam became overbalanced; his arms waved wildly in the air for a moment like windmills and then he fell backward into the mire. He clutched the tip end of a willow branch and by its slender aid tried to drag himself out. It was difficult work; cold, slimy water poured into his boot tops and the mire clung to his legs like a vise. If the willow broke he knew that he would be a goner. A less patient man would have snapped off the branch in a frenzy and sunk to destruction, but Sam nursed it tenderly and inched his way along carefully until he could grasp a sturdier one, and then it was only a matter of seconds till he could pull himself out to where he perched precariously on the roots of a willow bush. From his waist down and from his shoulders to his finger tips he was covered with a mess of dripping grayish mud.

The shots fired by the outlaw were being loudly answered by the jubilant yells of the posse who took it to mean that their quarry had been treed somewhere close at hand. In a few minutes they would find old Buck, and then the siege would be on in deadly earnest. Meantime Sam's business was to round up the real culprits inside the swamp.

To get back to the trail now was out of the question. A rod ahead the soil looked firmer, but it was a veritable jungle of birch and alder so thick that Sam judged it would scrape all the hair off a wildcat if such an animal endeavored to get through it. Nevertheless it was his one remaining chance.

Looking up he saw a wide sweeping birch tree that extended well over the morass from the thicket. "If I was only that Tarzan guy," he muttered, "this would be pie."

But he launched himself upward and outward in a mighty jump and just managed to clutch the end of the limber birch, which promptly bent beneath his weight, letting him down into the muck above his knees. Working hands and feet desperately he crept along his life line until he was once more huddled on more or less solid footing.

He had lost his hat in the last plunge and now he saw it floating realistically in the dead center of the quag. A moment later he heard the sound of subdued voices but a few rods away in another thicket on the other side of the mucky channel.

"Only one feller found the crossin', an' the mire got him. Look at his hat where he went under. If we keep quiet they'll go away," he heard.

"Mebbe so, but it was a hell of a mess you let us in for; killin' that marshal an' then lettin' 'em track yuh back here," growled another voice.

"I dunno how they done it, cause I kept in the brush all the way," replied the first speaker.

Sam now knew why Ted and Chet had been able to obtain their liquor that morning. Only one of the outlaws had been involved in the killing, and he had not yet returned there when the boys visited the swamp.

"You watch here an' I'll go back an'

help Kelly git our stuff ready to move at the first opportunity," Sam heard the reproachful one remark.

A few minutes later Sam began fighting his way through the thicket. The branches tore at him, ripping his clothing to shreds, scratching his face and pulling his hair; but he fought on resolutely and with each step he found the ground getting dryer and the trees higher. He realized that the swamp had always been deceptive; that it was not nearly so much of a swamp as had appeared from the outside.

Then he reached an impasse. Try as he would he could not force his way another yard through the thicket. He looked around and up. A tag alder, eight inches through at the butt and towering fifty feet high was directly in front of him. It was climb that tree or retreat, and he preferred to climb. He went up until he was above all but the tallest of the birches and the tree began to tremble beneath his weight. He realized that he was a ripe target if someone with good eyesight should chance to glance that way, but presently he forgot all about that as he looked down upon an open space which the thick brush had prevented him from seeing. There was a low wall tent, an ash pile surrounded by cooking utensils, a whisky still and its accessories—and half a veal with only a few steaks cut from it.

In front of the tent knelt two men busily constructing shoulder packs. They looked worried and were obviously desperate characters, even though it was the other man who had committed the murder. Sam's main thought, however, was to wonder how he was going to get down to them.

A few feet away and closer to the open space grew a shorter tag alder. Sam measured the distance carefully and decided that he could make it to that tree in one jump, and from there be able to command the situation with his gun. He drew his gun to have it handy, and holding on with one hand squirmed around to the proper side of the tree, swung far out—and jumped.

Descending, he struck the shorter tree as he intended and embraced it desperately. But the tree was coy. The top bent far over beneath his weight, and as he scrambled wildly to get on the upper side of it the brittle wood snapped and treetop and cowpuncher careened to earth.

Sad Sam emitted a wild yell that curdled his own blood as well as that of the astonished men who suddenly saw the amazing apparition descending upon them. For a moment the outlaws were too astonished to move, and then it was too late. They were flattened to the ground.

For a moment Sad Sam gasped to regain the breath that had been knocked out of him. It came back all of a sudden, and with it came speech.

"Lay still, dang ye, or I'll fall another tree on ye," he rasped at the prostrate badmen.

They looked up and saw a disheveled figure, which in its weird mixture of blood, dirt, and rags looked extremely comical, but there was nothing comical about the steady gray eyes or the unwavering six-shooter. They obeyed orders.

A little later, with these two safely trussed up and tied to a tree, Sad Sam started down the trail to find the third member of the gang. He had gone but a rod or two when he heard his man coming, and ducked behind a bush, at the same time making it plain to his two prisoners that anything save silence on their part would be most unhealthy.

"What the hell you fellers mean by yellin' in here? Now they know where we are an' they're shootin' hell outa things," the fellow was snarling.

The remark caused Sam to note that the swamp was being bombarded merrily by the posse. As the man came abreast of him he stepped out and pressed his gun against his ribs. "Keep right on walkin' an' don't look back," he advised, and his startled, helpless victim obeyed.

Ten minutes later Sad Sam crept cautiously to the edge of the swamp and yelled out that he wanted to surrender.

"Come on out then," rasped an imperative voice.

"I'm plumb anxious to, but yuh see I got three bootleggers tied up in here an' I want help t' git 'em out. One of 'em is the bird that killed that marshal," he said plaintively.

"What?" roared the officer.

"Yuh jest listen while I explain," Sam requested, and because they could not do otherwise until he told them how to get into the swamp, they listened.

"Damned if I believe it," snorted the

officer when Sam had finished, "but come on out an' we'll see if you're tellin' the truth."

Sad Sam pushed the pole across to hard ground and a dozen members of the posse, led by the man whom old Buck had knocked down the day before, swarmed across. The officer snorted as he laid eyes upon the grotesque figure before him. "If you think you'll git off by posin' as a crazy wild man you'll sure git stung," he declared ferociously.

Grunting angrily the officer followed Sam back along the trail. But at the sight of three men trussed up like chickens his grunting abruptly ceased.

"My Gawd," he said, marveling, "this long hombre musta told the truth. Them three birds are all escaped convicts, an' that one by himself there is "Whitey" Wright who threatened to git my pardner, poor George Poe, two years ago." He turned to Sad Sam and said feelingly:

"Pardner, is there anything I can do for you for nabbin' these crooks?"

"There is," Sam replied promptly. "Yuh kin donate me some raiment—and then some makin's. I'm dyin' for a smoke!"

LOST MINES FOUND

THE history of the West bristles with stories of lost mines. Every season dozens of expeditions set out, inspired by some such legend, and ever so rarely one returns with the actual rediscovery of an authentic "lost mine." During 1925, two such have been brought to light, one in Arizona, and one in the State of Nayarit, western Mexico.

The Mexican mine, known variously as the Flying Bug, the Lost Padre and La Cucaracha (the Cockroach), had been sought for during more than half a century. The California press, during January 1925, ran a dozen reports of its romantic discovery.

Seventeen years ago, Frank E. Davis, a mining engineer of San Francisco, was assayer at a mine in Mexico. He became friends with an aged priest, incumbent of the parish of Compostella. Through this friendship Davis was given the freedom of the church archives, some of which dated back two hundred years.

Davis found many references to Cortez and his followers. One in particular attracted his attention. It had to do with the presentation by the Spanish conqueror of a mine, La Cucaracha, to a brother-in-arms. A later reference told of such a mine being operated by slaves, and a reference later still gave engineering facts and surveys, production, and even assays, but it did not give the location.

Davis started to search for this mysterious "mine in the place of the cockroaches." He was not successful, and professional engagements plus unstable political conditions in Mexico halted his search. Years later, his belief unshaken, he returned. He was rewarded, for he did find it, in December 1924!

The physical conditions of the mine were just as recorded. The ancient workings are still the home of millions of cockroaches. The principal vein, sixteen feet in width, assays in both gold and silver approximately the same percentages as recorded. It is located adjacent to the town of Yago, State of Nayarit.

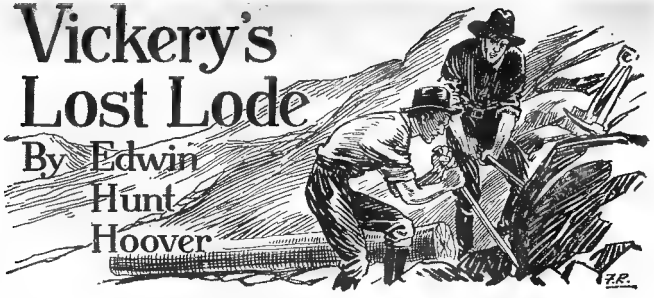
The discovery in Arizona was made a few days prior to Independence Day, 1925. This old mine was found by accident in the White Spar Mining District, Yavapai County. The Hassayampa Mining Company, operating the Malapai mine, had located some fractional claims to round out their holdings. They did not credit these with great value, securing them only to make a solid block. In doing the necessary location work, to their great surprise they broke into a blind shaft which gave every evidence of having been sealed up for many years. An examination proved it to be a small, developed mine, on a vein of good value commercial ore, with pockets of highgrade, assaying as high as five hundred dollars to the ton. Moreover, an ore bin was uncovered, housing several tons of picked and cleaned ore.

T. H. Wright, manager of the Hassayampa Company, made inquiries, but at first was unable to learn anything of the mines' former history. Then he discovered at the Pioneers' Home at Prescott an old frontiersman who had worked in the property in the seventies. His description tallied with the discovery of this summer.

Why this mine was hidden is known only to the original owners. The most probable theory is that, deciding to go on a distant journey, they sealed the entrance. Thereafter they may have been killed by the Apaches, or they may have died natural deaths in their native places, taking with them the secret of the mine.

RODERICK O'HAROAN.

Vickery's Lost Lode



By Edwin Hunt Hoover

Author of "Homengil, Gunman."

Lost Gold—its lure is the same to generation after generation, to honest man and thief. Until his health broke that lure held old Gran'pa Vickery; for years it beckoned to his grandson; and then even to Hibbard and Padget, with the avenging law hot on their trail.

TWICE before during the day, the amiable young cowboy had dropped into the temporary camp of Padget and Hibbard, once in the morning and again at noon. The first visit was, quite obviously, of an exploratory nature to acquaint himself with the other lonely inhabitants of that mountainous domain. The second time, at noon, his motives were frankly gastronomic.

Now, at dusk, the youthful centaur, who sat his pony with a lithe grace that won the grudging admiration of Padget and Hibbard, could be heard approaching again. The hoofs of his mount clattered stumblingly over rocks further up the gulch. The rider swore cheerfully at his horse and whistled doleful tunes, between times. Padget and Hibbard had kept him under observation most of the afternoon as he rode from point to point in the rocky basin, forming conclusions that were neither satisfactory nor definite.

Hibbard, lean faced and sharp featured, poked at the fire and turned to Padget, who was bringing a panful of flour from the tepee which housed their perishable food supplies.

"He's no pilgrim—that buckaroo," he commented, jerking a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of their approaching guest. "He's here for a purpose."

"Well, so're we," Padget replied. He was the larger of the pair, both in height and heft; and his long-unshaven face endowed him with an aspect not unlike that of the traditional prospecter.

"What I mean," Hibbard glanced up the gulch to be certain that his words would not carry to the horseman who was still a quarter mile distant, "he said, this mornin', that our faces looked vaguely familiar. This noon he didn't mention it, and here he comes again."

"What of it?" Padget, mixing dough, favored his thin featured partner with a somewhat contemptuous stare. "Nothin' unusual in a man's thinkin' he recognizes somebody an' then findin' he's made a mistake, is there? Your nerves are just merely on a bender. I think he's a cowpuncher out of a job who's prospectin' around on a chance that he might find gold in these hills."

"Maybeso. Maybeso," Hibbard busied himself with the dutch oven that hung suspended over the fire, forking out slabs of bacon to make room for the bread that Padget was preparing, "but I'd give a dime to know if the sheriff at Tucson has called on the New Mexico authorities——"

"Chuck line rider driftin' into camp!" sang out the cheerful horseman, reining his mount to a halt fifty yards or more from his unwilling hosts.

"Get down! Rest your saddle!" Padget roared. The greeting was one he had learned during a brief contact with cattlemen across the territorial line in Arizona.

"Don't mind if I do," came the response. "But it won't do any good to

feed me. I'll just eat up whatever's put in front o' me. Don't wait supper for me; I'll be in, soon as I air off my pony's back an' hobble him out with your burros."

Despite Padget's assurance that the cowboy was merely what he appeared to be—out of a job and prospecting around—he was the one who led their visitor into a personal discussion of himself. And he achieved gratifying results. The amiable young man squatted on his high heeled, spurred boots, discoursing volubly and apparently without reserve. He ate prodigious quantities of sow bosom, beans and biscuits, praising the food before, during and after eating. He responded to the name of Vic Ormsbee; had recently concluded work with the Tumble D spring round-up, and was on his way to Lordsburg for a frolic and another job with the Quarter Circle B. He asked no questions but discussed his own affairs freely.

"Y'u see," Ormsbee related, rolling his third or fourth cigarette, "I sort o' make my home in this part o' the range in order to be close to Gran'pa Vickery's gold mine——"

Padget and Hibbard simultaneously gave vent to incredulous grunts of, "Huh!"

"Not that the mine is operatin'," Ormsbee made haste to explain. "But there's a sort o' fascination to huntin' for it. Nobody knows exactly where it is, an' I spend my spare time tryin' to locate it. The whole darn fam'ly: pa, ma, Bud—that's my brother—an' me, moved to New Mexico from Colorado twenty years ago, when I was scarcely big enough to straddle a horse, for the purpose of findin' this lode. Pa gave up the hunt after a couple o' years an' settled down in Las Cruces where he runs a store with Bud to clerk for him. But me—" Ormsbee squinted into the fire thoughtfully—"I got sort o' hopped up on the fam'ly tradition. So, when I got older, I undertook the search single-handed an' have been at it ever since—seven-eight years.

"But I reckon I'll have to give it up, too. It keeps me broke, an' I've got to be savin' my money to get married on. Yep," he acknowledged, grinning, "I'm engaged; an' Myrtle won't consent to gettin' hitched unless I lay off this wild goose hunt, as she calls it, an' accumulate enough *dinero* to buy me a ranch. I hate it, too," he sighed lugubriously. "It's like quittin' a poker game when you're loser. I've got a nice assortment o' minin' equipment over in the next canyon which I've been prospectin' for the lost lode," Vic confided, "but I'm aimin' to haul it to town in a few days an' sell it for what I can get. You gents wouldn't be int'rested in takin' it off my hands, would you?" he inquired hopefully.

"Not likely," Hibbard answered sourly, drying three tin plates with a flour sack. "But I would be interested to know how your grandfather happened to get into this God-forsaken country."

"Oh—that!" Vic flicked the ashes from his cigarette. "He was comin' out of Mexico, horseback, with a party of minin' men when they saw that they were bein' pursued by a gang o' border roughnecks. Bein' as gran'pa's outfit was fairly well heeled with coin, they took to their heels, scatterin' in all directions. Gran'pa Vickery outrun the bandits, who may 'a' suspected that he didn't have any of the money; an' if that was their guess, it was correct, for he was broke. Howsumever, he had all the luck, because he was the only one to escape with his life. The others was overtaken, killed an' robbed.

"Gran'pa, who was a young man then, tryin' to build up a stake after the Civil War had ruint his Georgia cotton farm, made camp somewhere in this neighborhood the evenin' of his adventure with the outlaws. Accordin' to the map he drew—which my old man keeps in his strong-box—he camped by a little spring at the foot of a wall o' rimrock in the midst of a grove o' young cottonwoods. Whilst pirootin' around for fuel, he staggered onto an outcroppin' of rich mineral. He didn't have any prospectin' tools because he'd throwed everythin' overboard in his haste to make a get-away; but he poked around with a picket pin an' pried loose some float that was almost pure gold! He brought these pecimens out with him; they're also in pa's strong-box.

Ormsbee's mood of eagerness fell from him and he rose gloomily to throw some more wood on the blaze.

"Sounds like a pretty wild tale," Padget commented, eyeing Hibbard speculatively. "Why didn't he develop the prospect if it was so rich?"

"Well, for one thing," the cowboy

replied, "Gran'pa Vickery didn't have any grub to speak of, so he couldn't stay; an', besides, he didn't want to tell strangers about his find. He aimed to go home, raise some money an' return. But by the time he got to the railroad at Santa Fé, he was sick. When he reached home he had a tolerably well developed case o' black smallpox which he'd contracted in Mexico; shortly thereafter he died, but not before he'd told his wife about the gold. Well, you know how these things get carried along in the fam'ly without anythin' bein' done about it," Vic told his auditors. "Gran'-ma passed the story along to her daughter who married my father; an' pa, when he heard about it, studied the lay careful——"

"You say there was a spring?" Padget interrupted.

"Sure," Ormsbee confirmed. "An' there's a spring a half mile up this draw that lines up pretty with a red rock on yonder pinnacle and a lightnin'-struck pine—which conforms to directions on Gran'pa Vickery's map—but there's no rimrock behind it or any grove o' cottonwoods in front. Over the ridge where I've been explorin' lately, I've got the rimrock an' trees, but there's no spring an' the location don't line up so good with the other landmarks. My idea is," he confided, "that the earthquake that hit this country durin' the 'seventies has raised hib with landmarks—or else gran'pa was cuckoo. In either case, I'm beginnin' to think that it's a waste o' time an' money to follow this lost lode any further, 'specially since Myrtle don't take any stock in it."

Ormsbee lapsed into melancholy silence; but Padget, evidently bent on encouraging the visitor in his quest, asked many questions—to Hibbard's obvious scorn—regarding the topography of the country, the effect of the earthquake, Gran'pa Vickery's route when that gentleman made his hurried departure from the border. To all these queries, Vic responded fulsomely, gratified to find a kindred soul that thrilled to his tale of lost treasure.

When it came time to retire, Padget hospitably loaned Ormsbee a pair of blankets and led Hibbard from camp on a pretext of bringing water from the tiny creek that flowed a dozen yards east of the tepee.

"We've got our hands right on Gran'-pa Vickery's lost mine if we play our cards right," he whispered.

"You're crazy," Hibbard scoffed, thinking of the easy profit his long, capable fingers might derive from more tangible cards.

"You don't need to throw in with me on this," the bearded one persisted huffily; "but I have an idea that the money in your kick will go to buy that simple-minded cowpuncher's claim an' equipment in the next canyon, whether you like it or not," he added threateningly when a subdued oath of angry protest rose to his companion's lips. "Listen here. It was my gun—" he tapped the weapon at his hip—"that saved your bacon over at Tucson, an' it'll settle your hash if we don't get together on this deal.

"Look there!" he pointed covertly at the boulder field a few rods to their left. "That jumble o' granite an' sandstone was once rimrock; you can see where it's broke off from the top of the main wall. Where it ends, the grove o' cottonwoods—old ones—commences. Also, if you'll look over your left shoulder, carelesslike, you'll see the lightnin'-struck pine on that high hill west of us, with a red, pointed rock on the pinnacle behind it. That would line up direct with the place that Gran'pa Vickery described as rimrock—a *fine* bead, with the point o' the red rock seemin' to touch the north side o' the tree, if you'll sight from the proper place in the slide! Ormsbee has been takin' his alignment with *coarse* sights, assumin' that the pine will loom up in the middle of the pointed rock!"

Hibbard repeated the opinion that his partner was unbalanced mentally, but with less conviction.

"Here's what happened," Padget elaborated. "That earthquake thirty years ago knocked down the rimrock. It covered up part o' the cottonwoods. The rest are still standin' an' have aged since that time. The spring seeps through the rocks—an' that's the source of our water supply here! It's a cinch! Only that brainless boob can't figure it out. He thinks the earthquake dried up the spring in the next canyon, forcin' the water to the surface in this basin. He gets a fair lineup on the tree an' pointed rock, but——"

Hibbard, who had been surveying the

moonlit scenery, suddenly gripped his partner's arm.

"You're right," he agreed. "But," he threw a damp blanket on the newly-aroused hopes, "how're we goin' to work a mine, and a rich one, at that, without takin' a long chance that someone who knows us will come in here."

"Easy!" Padget passed up this detail with a shrug of his heavy shoulders. "When we locate the mine we'll go outside an' find a purchaser to buy it. We don't do any development work or be here when the excitement is on. We'll be in Europe or South America spendin' our money!"

"How about title?" Hibbard's mind, awakened to the possibilities of the situation, busied himself with details of "clean-up" and "get-away."

"Government land," Padget answered. "Unsurveyed likely. All we'll have to do will be to show the bonanza to any minin' man an' he'll attend to the rest."

MORNING came, depressingly hot. The cowboy, saddling up for his ride to Lordsburg, ventured a hope that the partners would reconsider their decision, and make an offer on his mining equipment.

"These hills have got some mineral in 'em," he urged. "If I was a regular prospector, like you fellows, I might do some good for myself on the spot where I've been huntin' for Gran'pa Vickery's mine. There's some quartz lyin' around ——"

This was the opportunity Padget had been waiting for.

"We'll walk over to your layout an' see if you've got anything we could use," he said with a show of reluctance.

Within an hour young Ormsbee had made a sale. For one hundred dollars, cash, he sold a quantity of dynamite, various tools, pack saddles and a cache of food supplies. Furthermore he informally quit-claimed any and all mineral interest in the location.

"Not that I have any title, because I didn't file a claim," Vic explained. "But if it'll make y'u feel any safer, here's my signature."

He appended his name to the memorandum of agreement that Hibbard scribbled on a page torn from his notebook.

"Now I wonder," Hibbard mused as he and Padget watched Ormsbee disappear around a turn in the canyon, "if that lad has anything on his mind except hair. Do you s'pose he told us that yarn in order to sell us his stuff?" His shrewd, calculating eyes swept over the recent purchase.

"Not a chance." Padget bit into a plug of tobacco and brushed the back of his hairy hand across his hairier lips. "If he'd been calculatin' on somethin' like that, he would 'a' given us a description o' *this* place. No, sir! Our young friend didn't have the least notion, last night, that he was sittin' less than two hundred yards from the location of the lost mine. If he had, you can be dang sure he'd 'a' kep' his mouth shut an' waited for us to move on, which we would have to do before long if we hadn't acquired his grub supply. Now we can stay a month. That will give us time to blast out the boulder field an' get to the level where Gran'pa Vickery found his float—with the dynamite bought from the ol' jasper's grandson! Then when we find the vein——"

"If we find it," his thin associate corrected.

"Ain't you satisfied yet that we know where the lode's located?" Padget demanded querulously.

"In a general way. But we have to plough through an acre of slide before we uncover the exact spot," Hibbard reflected. His hands were not accustomed to the bleak toil that would be involved, and he had a premonition that the labor might prove to be an insurmountable obstacle.

"I learnt enough from Mr. Ormsbee last night so that I can go within a mighty short distance of the exact spot you mention. Looky here!" Padget broke a mesquite twig from a bush and drew a rough diagram in the sand. "The spring rises fifty yards west of the base o' the rimrock. About half-way between is the ledge from which Gran'pa Vickery took his specimens. We can pretty near locate the spring by listenin' through the rocks, an' plan our work accordin'ly! You ain't listenin' the least bit to what I'm sayin'" the big man protested.

Hibbard sighed relievedly, contentedly.

"No, I wasn't," he acknowledged. "I was wonderin' why Ormsbee made camp with us, instead of goin' back to his own. Now I know. There's no water in his

canyon and he would have had to carry it across the ridge."

"Well, ain't you bright!" Padget admired sarcastically. He had lived in the open more than Hibbard and understood the ways of its people. "There's two other reasons why he threw in with us besides that one. He wanted comp'ny, bein' discouraged an' hopeless about ever findin' the mine; also he saw a chance to sell us his outfit, thus savin' him the expense of bringin' a wagon for it. That's about the limit of his intelligence. If he'd had more, he'd 'a' shut up like a clam when I began askin' questions about the lost mine."

"I'm satisfied—at last." Hibbard confessed. "It just didn't seem reasonable that we would find such a break of luck, in such a way. I'll go back to our camp for the burros, an' you get the stuff ready to pack."

HIBBARD and Padget put in eight days of back-breaking labor before they congratulated themselves that they were nearing their objective. Sweaty, tired and with aching muscles, they reached the original level of the mountain through the stubborn jumble of fallen rocks. Their fascinated eyes beheld an omen of wealth in the glittering sands of a dry rivulet which, during rainy seasons, carried a torrent of water to augment the flow of spring water further down the slope.

"Gold!" Hibbard gasped, his pessimism, which had been rising during the period of sinew-cracking toil, conquered forever.

"Washed down from the mother lode," Padget agreed with the complacent air of one who has achieved the expected. "All we have to do is follow this dry wash to its source. An' it can't be far—judgin' from the amount o' dust that's deposited here. Let's pan some of it. There's a hundred dollars' worth of it in plain sight, I'll bet."

Quickly they separated, Hibbard to bring a flask of water and Padget the frying pan. Together they washed out a handful of fine gold dust. Hibbard, naturally unemotional, as befitted a gambler, flung his arms around Padget's shoulders and wept.

That night there was little sleep for either of them. Fitful snatches of slumber were fraught with wild dreams and they wakened, each to find the other's wakeful eyes on him. There were moments when, in the semi-darkness of the tent, there was a tension, unbroken by any words, that caused both men to reach stealthily for the pistols that cuddled next to them in the blankets.

Their common need for seclusion and companionship had developed a confidential and friendly bond between them. Now, however, suspicion flared. The intentions of both were honest, yet Hibbard conceived a suspicion that Padget was meditating some evil; and Padget's mind was receptive to the same thought concerning Hibbard. To the fear that their mutual enemy, the law, might overtake them was added the more personal and present menace that neither could trust the other.

Breakfast before dawn, therefore, was not such an enjoyable meal as might reasonably be expected in the camp of two partners who had struck it rich. But the food and the activity of preparing it brought their mental faculties to a saner focus.

"Fifty-fifty," Padget growled through his beard after the silence had grown oppressive.

There was no occasion, for the proposal. Nothing had been said. There had been no intimation that any other arrangment was contemplated. Yet the words were as intelligible to Hibbard as if the situation had been discussed at leisure and a decision reached. He was both gratified and relieved.

"Fifty-fifty," he replied.

They clasped hands over their plates of beans. Shortly thereafter they set out for the boulder field with a view to blasting the gold bearing dry wash clear of rocks.

This matter required some study. The men wanted to reach the mother lode as quickly as possible; and the question arose as to whether they would save time by sinking a shaft some yards farther east, or clearing the creek bed as they went.

Padget, in the pit, was arguing that their easiest course was to topple and blast rocks into the area already opened, pan for gold and clear a right-of-way as they proceeded. Hibbard, on the surface of the slide, was debating over the engineering problem and kicking absently at loose fragments when a giant boulder, deprived of a lightly wedged keystone,

lost its precarious balance and crashed over the edge.

Hibbard, himself almost caught when the monster rock swayed drunkenly before its fall, leaped to safety. His first coherent thought was regarding Padget's fate, for no sound came from the shaft. He took a step toward the cavity —and caught a flash of his bearded, raging partner emerging from below.

Without hesitation Hibbard reached for his gun, for Padget's was already drawn, but his hand palsied in midair. He pitched forward with a bullet in his head and another leaden slug through his throat. His lips moved in an effort to tell Padget that the falling rock had been accidental. But this information never reached the killer, who believed that he had dealt with treachery according to its merits.

Padget callously dragged his former partner to the lip of the pit, helped himself to the dead man's personal effects, and then tumbled the body into its tomb.

"Tries to kill me right after shakin' my hand," he muttered. "Might 'a' known a crooked gambler wouldn't shoot square with anybody if he could clean up by double-crossin'. Good riddance. Bad rubbish."

Padget, having made the gesture of friendship which brought about the fifty-fifty understanding, considered Hibbard's supposed attempt at murder doubly heinous. It was, therefore, with no regret or compunction that he set off a charge of dynamite which brought down a curtain of rocks over the corpse. If he felt any twinges of conscience, they were forgotten in the excitement of the following hours.

The blast that buried Hibbard was fortunate. It partially opened a cavern which was formed by a huge boulder bridging two upstanding blocks of sandstone. Even so, there were obstacles to clear away; but, when this was accomplished, Padget found the parched rivulet ready to hand and smiling up at him.

The gloom in the cave made it impossible for him to determine whether the values were present. Therefore he scooped a quantity of the sand into his hat and crawled outside, where he washed the gold from the dross with the water and frying-pan he and Hibbard had brought for that purpose.

His fingers trembled and his beard fairly bristled as his eyes read the evidence that he must be nearing the treasure house of the mountain. The surface sands were almost pure gold.

Throwing aside the pan, Padget squirmed inside the cave. Minutes later he came out—a wild man, hatless, his hair dishevelled, his eyes protruding. In his hands and pockets were chunks of quartz, seamed, blistered and bursting with free gold! The man knew them for what they were without the aid of sunlight, but he felt a frantic urge to feast his eyes and imagination on them.

He sorted over the pieces of float with miserly precision, arranging them in groups, according to size and shape. There was more where these came from, he gloated, caught in a rock pocket which served as a dam against egress of the treasure except such tiny particles as were washed down by occasional torrents. And behind this pocket was a ledge—the outcropping of the mother lode itself—which Padget had inspected with the aid of a lighted match!

"Gran'pa Vickery's gold mine!" he shouted, half in ecstasy and half in derision of the simple minded cowboy who had confided the secret of its hiding place.

Then, in more conversational tones, he communed with himself, fondling the precious mineral. He decided that he would pack out, that night, such of the float as he could load onto the burros; then vetoed this plan as being likely to bring him too much in the limelight of publicity. He would go outside, empty handed save for a few of the smallest specimens, quietly hunt up a purchaser, pocket his money and put as much distance as possible between himself and the mine.

IT SEEMED almost a fatalistic coincidence to Padget that he should be eating a hurried lunch, in camp, when Ormsbee's cheerful whistling sounded down the gulch. Nine days ago, at the same approximate time, the cowboy had heralded his approach in the same genial, careless way. Hibbard had been there, then.

Suddenly Padget began to speculate with alarm. Could Ormsbee, by any chance, have heard the shout and been a witness to the bringing of the fabulous rich quartz into the open? Could he have seen the shooting? Padget's nerves

tingled at the possibility. Already on his feet with his hand to his hip, he relaxed confidently. If Ormsbee had, by accident, been on the ground earlier, he either would have sped to Lordsburg for some official or other reinforcement, or else he would have lain in wait to get the drop on Padget. Even so stupid a person as Ormsbee would not ride thus openly into the presence of a man he knew to be a killer, or in possession of a treasure worth fighting and dying for.

"Bah!" the big man spat. "I may have to kill him if he gets to nosin' around, but I'll give him a chance for his life if he passes on without learnin' anythin'."

He advanced a dozen paces up the draw to greet the rider.

"I don't like the looks o' this," he told himself. "What brings him back—at such an inconvenient time? He'd better give a good account o' himself, or out goes his light!"

Ormsbee reined his horse jauntily into the clearing beyond the cottonwoods. If he had turned to the left into the rock slide, he would have been shot out of the saddle by Padget's accurate forty-five.

"Guess you'll think I'm a regular chuck-liner," he caroled joyously, as one sure of his welcome. "Thought I'd find you over on the other side o' the ridge, but I see you've moved my junk over here. It is a nuisance campin' in a dry canyon."

Ormsbee dismounted and walked alongside Padget, leading his horse.

"An' I suppose you and Mr. Hibbard decided that the prospects didn't justify the inconvenience," he rattled on. "Golly, I'm hungry," he chattered on, flopping down near the tepee while Padget was scraping a remnant of beans from the dutch oven. "Been ridin' since long before sunup."

"Must be somethin' urgent," Padget hazarded, wrestling with a desire to choke the young enthusiast and his consequential monologue.

"In a manner of speakin', yes." Vic replied, over a cup of coffee. "Still, I knew that you an' Mr. Hibbard wouldn't take any unfair advantage. Y'u see, when I told Myrtle about the trade I'd made with you gents, she was tickled that I'd abandoned my 'foolishness'; but yest'day when I rode into town from the roundup camp, she said she'd been studyin' over that quitclaim I signed. It's her opinion," he explained apologetically, "that the paper might be construed—that's the word she used—to mean that I was signin' away all right an' title to Gran'pa Vickery's lost lode, which, o' course, I ain't qualified to do since my mother is rightfully heiress to it. Besides, there's a law which gives a 'discovery right' to the person who finds a lode, an' to his heirs——"

"I never heard of any such law," Padget protested, milling over the advisability of provoking a quarrel on this point and putting Ormsbee away.

Still, he reflected, Ormsbee's disappearance would call for an investigation—which would not be the case with Hibbard, because Hibbard would never be missed. This would be borrowing trouble which might be avoided.

"Neither did I, till Myrtle mentioned it," Vic's ingenuous and friendly blue eyes smiled with an expression of humility and bashfulness. "She's got a business head on her, Myrtle has. An' she wouldn't rest easy till I promised to make a *pasear* out here an' rig up a new agreement with you an' Mr. Hibbard. I won't insist on it, because the statue—statute—protects my mother in case you should happen to stumble onto gran'pa's mine—a half int'rest or somethin' of the sort. But I sort o' thought that I'd mention it an' see what you gents wanted to do about it."

Padget bit his mustache as if in deep thought, although his mind was already made up. He could sign any sort of agreement, leave the country as soon as he had effected a sale of the bonanza, and be so far away by the time Ormsbee found out about the transaction that prosecution would be useless. What did he care about Ormsbee, his mother or the law—if he could outwit them?

"Oh, I guess we won't have any trouble comin' to terms," the bearded man declared with a show of affability. He was willing to do anything to hasten his visitor's departure. "We'll just tear up the paper we signed last week an' figure out a new one that'll be fair to all concerned." He drew Hibbard's wallet from a trouser pocket, searching for the desired paper until he found it. Then, with a ceremonious flourish he tore it into bits. "Now we can get down to business."

"We better wait until Mr. Hibbard

drifts in, hadn't we?" the cowboy suggested. "By the way, where is he?"

Padget was prepared for this.

"Oh, he's gone outside," he answered airily. "Took a few specimens to be assayed so that we could make up our minds whether our work here was goin' to pay us. But I can sign for both him an' me."

"Sure!" agreed Ormsbee, a shade of disappointment on his smooth, hickory-hued features. "But I'm disappointed not to see him. I sort o' liked him. Y'u know—" he set down his cup and plate and rolled a cigarette—"who d'you s'pose I thought you an' him might be when I first saw y'u?"

"Wouldn't venture a guess." Padget, on guard, stiffened involuntarily, but stared with a pretence of amiability into Ormsbee's boyishly amused eyes. "You mentioned—first time you came into camp—that we seemed to resemble somebody you ought to know."

"Uh-huh. Just shows what association of ideas will do to a man. The sheriff, over in Las Cruces, was lookin' for a couple o' parties named Aitkin an' Hill—" if Ormsbee, absorbed in his narrative, saw the quick change of expression in his companion's eyes he gave no sign—"who are wanted for murder over in Tucson. He had information that Aitkin had been seen in New Mexico an' apparently was headed in the direction o' Lordsburg. It was a foregone conclusion that the suspected man would have to make this basin in order to get water. So the sheriff, knowin' that I was aimin' to hit this territory, told me to keep my eyes peeled for pilgrims without pedigrees.

"Consequently, when I run onto you an' Mr. Hibbard, my first thoughts was, 'Here's both Aitkin an' Hill.' An' bein' nervous, I like' to tipped my mitt by sayin' that your faces looked familiar. But when I sized up the lay, I see that the pair o' you didn't tally out with the descriptions of a slender gent with a pointed, slightly gray beard—Hill, who is a tinhorn gambler an' a forger— or a smooth-faced six-footer—Aitkin, a former train robber. In the first place, Mr. Hibbard, who I thought might be Hill, hasn't got any gray hair—Padget remembered that his dead partner's head showed no gray, nor did his beard unless allowed to grow for several days—"an' you ain't more than of a size with me, which is a full two inches under six foot. Besides, you're wearin' a full face which couldn't possibly 'a' been grown in seven weeks since the Tucson killin'."

Padget thanked his lucky star that his build gave a false impression of height and that his beard grew abnormally fast; otherwise even such a bonehead as Ormsbee might have penetrated his meager disguise. It gave the burly man a tremendous thrill to feel secure from detection and hear himself discussed thus freely. He laughed with real enjoyment.

Ormsbee grinned sheepishly.

"O' course, it didn't take half an eye for me to see that you an' Hibbard were sure enough prospectors, an' to realize that if you were makin' a get-away you wouldn't be travelin' together," he went on. "But I thought I'd tell y'u, since we've got to be such good friends, an' all."

"Who were me an' Hibbard supposed to 'a' killed—if we turned out to be Hill an' Aitkin?" Padget asked, his chuckles rumbling.

"George Culp, a cowman over Tucson way." Ormsbee was informative; indeed, Padget—or Aitkin—had heard the man referred to as "George". "Culp didn't know, when he sat into a poker game with Hill an' Aitkin, that the pair were brother-in-lawin'. But he found out when he caught Hill palmin' a card an', without warnin' or discussion, was killed by Aitkin. Hill reached for his gun an' Culp beat him to the draw, figurin' only on keepin' the tinhorn covered. If he'd suspected Aitkin—or if anybody else at the table had suspected him—there prob'ly wouldn't 'a' been any shootin'; at any rate, Culp wouldn't 'a' been the victim. Anyhow, Aitkin shot Culp through the left temple while Culp was payin' attention to Hill, an' made his escape with his pardner.

"Both these guys," Ormsbee went on, "are convicts that broke out o' the Colorado penitentiary, though, from what I hear, Hill ain't such a desperate character; but Aitkin, now—he's a bad man right! He's supposed to 'a' killed four or five persons, but all they could convict him for, in Colorado, was robbery with a gun."

"An' you thought I was him!" Padget guffawed.

"He couldn't be quite sure—so he sent for me to identify you, Aitkin!"

The voice was not Ormsbee's. It came from behind Padget and froze the very marrow in his bones. There was a familiar timbre to the words. Almost, it might have been the voice of George Culp, whom Padget had last seen slumped over a card table in a haze of acrid powder smoke.

Aitkin, the killer, recently "Padget", transfixed Ormsbee, the happy-go-lucky cowboy, with a murderous glare—which disturbed Ormsbee not at all, for he smiled quietly, understandingly and contentedly. The thumb of his right hand was hooked easily in his belt, where the fingers were much more convenient to the handle of his gun than Padget's were to his weapons.

The moment was highly dramatic. A rehearsal could hardly have made it more so. In fact, it had been carefully planned, but Ormsbee's assistant had chosen his cue extemporaneously.

"Just elevate your hands, like the train passengers use' to do at your request," Ormsbee urged, without moving so much as an eyelash. "That's fine," he commended when Aitkin, feeling a metallic touch at his spinal column, obeyed. "Just hold that pose while Jim takes y'ur hardware. You'll remember Jim when y'u see him. He's George Culp's brother an' actin' sheriff at Tucson. They look alike. Just make sure that you collect the extra gun at his waistband, Jim," he admonished. "Hibbard—I mean Hill—left his artillery, as well as his wallet, with Aitkin when he went on his trip."

A WIRY, bowlegged man whose countenance bore the weather signs of forty-odd years joined Ormsbee, who remained seated on the ground, after removing Aitkin's guns and equipping him with manacles. Aitkin had no trouble distinguishing the family resemblance of Jim to the deceased George Culp, but it gave him no particular satisfaction.

"I'd ought to kill you," Culp observed judicially. "But the reward's bigger for you alive; an' George's widow an' kids, who'll get it soon as it's turned over to me, can use it. Too bad we can't take Hill in with us. The penitentiary reward for him would help quite a bit, even though the county didn't offer any bonus for his arrest."

Aitkin, raging, was tempted to hurl himself at his captors and invite the almost certain death that would await him, but a better plan suggested itself. Therefore he made overtures.

"Listen to me, an' I'll make George Culp's fam'ly rich," he urged. "I'll make you men rich, too, if you'll turn me loose. I've got gold stashed out, an' I'll turn it over to y'u if I have y'ur word that y'u'll not take me in. Fifty thousand dollars—maybe more." He named a sum that might credibly be within the means of an ex-train-robber and yet be large enough to tempt his captors.

This offer left Culp and Ormsbee strangely apathetic. They smiled at each other in a manner that disquieted Aitkin.

"Oh, y'u mean gold from Gran'pa Vickery's lost lode!" Ormsbee surmised placidly.

"Y'u knew it was buried under that rock slide?" Aitkin, beside himself, leaped to his feet and was held in check only by the sharp, sinister *click* of Culp's pointed pistol.

"I couldn't be sure, o' course." Ormsbee doffed his big hat and looked inside it as if he found the interior vastly entertaining. "But I'd doped it out pretty careful that the only remainin' place it could possibly be was under the boulder field. Still, what with Myrtle cuttin' up the way she did, the disappointments I'd met in other locations an' a natural disinclination for manual labor, I couldn't make up my mind to tackle the job.

"Then, when I recognized you an' Hill, camped near at hand, the plot thickened. I was satisfied in my own mind that you were the gents that Jim Culp was lookin' for, but I couldn't be certain without sendin' for someone to identify y'u. Wherefore I solved both my difficulties by puttin' you an' Hill to work, which insured your hein' here till I should get back."

This time Aitkin, whose brain finally encompassed the fact that he had been tricked, trapped, used as a snare for himself and as a useful expedient to quarry out the tons of rock that concealed the lost mine, did not restrain himself. With one bound he was upon Ormsbee. Culp might have shot him enroute; instead, though, he launched himself merrily into the fray and, with the butt of

his gun, subdued Aitkin in short order. He was bending over Aitkin when the latter, more securely trussed this time, recovered consciousness.

"Maybe I broke his fool head," Jim was muttering.

The prisoner, prostrate on his back, sought to enjoy his one possible moment of triumph at the expense of Ormsbee, who was peering over Culp's shoulder.

"No, y'u didn't break my head. But it'll break your heart when Hill gets back with the property recorded in our names an' a purchaser for it. You'll have one hell of a lawsuit—an' lose out." This, he conceived, would at least account for Hill and cause Ormsbee a tremendous amount of worry.

"That would be a surprise," Vic conceded. "But unless two pairs of marine glasses an' our eyes have played us false durin' the last three days, Hill ain't comin' back—unless he's exhumed to double-copper-rivet your conviction. I had a hell of a time keepin' Jimmy Culp from arrestin' the pair o' you before y'u uncovered gran'pa's mine."

Aitkin groaned. Ormsbee, whom he had classified as a simpleton, had been in complete control of the situation all the time.

"I got soft-hearted about me lettin' you do all the work," he heard Ormsbee say, "an' then takin' the mine away from y'u, so I had notions of stakin' y'u to lawyer's fees—but the cold-blooded way in which y'u killed Hill——"

"He tried to mash me with a rock!" Aitkin yelled.

"It didn't look that way to Jim an' me. Anyhow, if he was tryin' to get rid o' you in order to have the property for hisself, it was no more than you were willin' to do to me, if y'u'd had the chance. So I reckon your share o' Gran'pa Vickery's mine will go to George Culp's widow; my part will buy a *rancho* for Myrtle an' me; an' my mother'll get the rest. No doubt gran'pa would be s'prised at the manner in which his lost lode was rediscovered, but I have an idea that he'd be gratified to know that his grandson ain't so much of a bonehead as some people have thought he was!"

MOORE REVOLVER

THE late '60s, after the Civil War, saw the end, practically, of the percussion firearms and the beginning of the age of fixed ammunition. The firm of Smith & Wesson claims the honor of the first manufacture of metallic self-contained cartridges, but Ethan Allen makes a like claim—and it is known that several years before the dates set by either, fixed ammunition was being used.

One of the first patents for cartridge revolvers covered the boring completely through of the cylinder and consequent loading from the rear, necessitating rimmed shells.

The firm making the Moore revolvers tried to compete with these patent holders with a very excellent revolving pistol with rifled barrel, steel cylinder and, usually, a gun metal frame. His designer gave the weapons very pleasing lines and the guns were splendidly made and, nearly always, engraved and embellished; but the novelty lay in the ammunition.

The copper shells, in .32 calibre only, were flanged at the muzzle instead of at the base, and the base was almost a semi-sphere except for a small projection, or teat, at the center which contained the fulminate. The cartridge immediately became the teat cartridge.

The firing pin on the hammer was given a downward curve, like a hawk's beak, so the teat would be struck from the top instead of from the rear as in the rim-fire.

Moore seems to have made and sold a large number of revolvers using this peculiar ammunition, as well as a very novel derringer, avoiding any infringements on existing patents; and then unaccountably dropping out of manufacturing existence. Specimens of his work now are valued highly by collectors of historic firearms.

M. L. WEAVER.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

By

Charles E. Barnes

Author of "A Tight Corner," etc.

Down Frawg Hollow way on a warmish day, even sal'manders glowed red hot; the merc'ry boiled, an' hossflesh broiled, for there wa'n't no shady spot. The Long-un and Runt, on a coolin'-off hunt, figgered nobody oughta laugh; so the sheriff's roar made 'em simmerin' sore, an' they give that gent the gaff.

FRAWG HOLLOW was the kind of place where thermometers find no sale. According to the oldest inhabitant, whose veracity never was openly questioned by a person of discretion, the one attempt to record the local temperature was represented by the forlorn wreck of an instrument still hanging in front of Doc. Weston's drug store; this had exploded the first day it was hung on the shady side of a post. The most popular description of the straggling cowtown generally was given complete in four letters, and it needed no other. Why it was called Frawg Hollow puzzled even the truthful oldest inhabitant, for, though it stood in a slight depression in a rolling land of sage and cactus, one found it hard to believe a frog had ever croaked in this sun scorched desert.

It was always hot, but in midafternoon the sun beat down with a merciless heat that made anything suggestive of physical exertion an act of lunacy. Yet it was at this hottest time of such a hot day that the Long-un and the Runt elected to arrive in Frawg Hollow to wake up the natives. Not that they had any such intention—as they themselves would have protested, two more peace loving men never existed—but as they rode slowly up the one sided street, apparently impervious to the burning heat, they presented a vision to the group of loungers loafing half asleep in the patch of shade in front of the Golden Eagle, which roused one of them to the energy of an exclamation.

"Fer Gawd's sake, look what's comin'!"

It was a sight to draw a smile from even the heat smothered denizens of Frawg Hollow. The Long-un was so long he looked to have been stretched when young to the limit of elasticity. His extraordinary height gave him the appearance of corresponding thinness, but this was an illusion which had led many a man to his undoing. Lean he was, but there was a deal more than bone under his loose fitting clothes. He was riding an undersized pinto cayuse, lean and wiry as himself, and one felt that if he straightened out his legs his feet would drag on the ground. His face and steady gray eyes were marked by a solemn gravity. One cheek was distended by a huge plug of tobacco which he chewed with slow deliberation, and he spat with great frequency. It was characteristic of the Long-un that he always spat at a definite mark, with astonishing accuracy, following the course of his projectile with grave approval until it unerringly hit his temporary target.

The Runt was as ridiculously short as his companion was long. Perched on the back of a big, rangy chestnut he looked from a distance like a round ball surmounted by a mushroom hat. What hair could be seen was of a brick red. A short pug nose was almost lost in his round, moonlike face; and his eyes, of very light blue, seemed to have caught the gravity of his hawk visaged partner, an expression which looked oddly out

of place on his cherubic countenance.

They rode slowly and sedately as became two philosophers, looking neither to right nor left, sparing of conversation, apparently wrapped in thought. Their progress had brought them opposite the Golden Eagle when the Long-un, spitting with deadly accuracy at a clucking hen who had chosen the last moment to flutter across the road in front of the horses' feet, drawled in an uninterested tone, "'Pears to me like they's laughin' at you."

The Runt made no reply, did not so much as turn his head, but chestnut and pinto wheeled with the precision of a cavalry maneuver and walked straight to the wide patch of shadow, where they stopped. Long-un dropped one foot to the ground and lifted the other over the pinto's back while the Runt rolled off his mount. Standing side by side, facing the half dozen men in the "loafer chairs", they looked more than ever like two freaks temporarily wandering from their home in a sideshow; but the laughter which had greeted their first appearance had subsided to broad grins, and these were fading into rather sickly looking smiles before the glassy stare of the Runt's light blue eyes, in which were glinting queer points of yellow light.

It had become very quiet. Long-un ran his eyes over the row of seated men in grave scrutiny, spat through the dead center of a knothole in the board sidewalk, then, laying his hand on the Runt's shoulder, spoke with a slow lazy drawl. "My pardner don't like laughin'," he said, as if that were a perfectly natural bias of a sober mind. "It makes him nervous, an' when he's nervous he's like to git rough. Was anybody round here laughin'?"

For some reason five of the hard featured faces lined against the wall assumed a soberness that denied any inclination to merriment, but the sixth, a man of heavy build with huge shoulders and a bull neck, answered with a great guffaw. "Laugh!" he shouted. "'Course I was laughin'—I'm laughin' *yet!* Fer Gawd's sake git out o' this town pronto 'fore I *die* o' laughin'!"

Without warning, and swift as the strike of a rattler, the Runt bounded forward, then like a ball on the end of an elastic string, bounded back when he reached the length of Long-un's arm. He was swung to the rear; the long stiltlike legs opened and shut like a huge pair of shears, and before the big man in the chair could make a move his bulbous nose was seized between fingers that felt like things of steel and twisted with a wrench that brought a squeal of pain.

Within the next few seconds many things happened. The insulted man bounded out of his chair with a blood-curdling oath. He aimed a terrific blow at the lean face far above him, but the face had disappeared—and he was never quite sure when he next saw it. He was seized by something like the arms of a gigantic windmill, buffeted, twisted and tossed until he could not have told whether the earth was under his feet or his head. Long-un handled him like a pup with a new plaything and finally carried him to the corner and deposited him in the horse trough with a mighty splash.

The Runt gave no heed to the onesided battle. Striding back and forth in front of the row of chairs he eagerly searched each face for the faintest indication of a desire to smile. It argued well for the impression the partners had made that five men could watch with sober faces the strutting of the fat little game-cock on his ridiculous bandy legs; but what time they were not wholly engrossed with Long-un's exhibition, they regarded the little man without the faintest glimmer of amusement. When Long-un, having disposed of his victim, returned from the trough, the Runt cast one final glare at the row of faces and fell in at his side. It took three of his steps to match one of the giant's strides, but as they walked to their horses, solemnly, as though leaving a funeral gathering, if any man saw humor in the situation he thought it wise to postpone its vocal expression.

Long-un was about to mount when a stray gust of wind blew a small square of printed paper against his feet. He picked it up and, as they resumed their slow unhurried progress, he idly read it through, then passed it over to the Runt. The little man read it with equal deliberation, folded it and put it in his pocket, then suddenly broke out with surprising heat. "Darn yore measly hide, Long-un," he spluttered, "haint I told you I don't want you buttin' into my fights?"

"Ye-ah," Long-un admitted.

"If you'd let me alone I'd a busted him wide open."

"Ye-ah."

"You think cause yore built like a hay derrick you kin hog all the fun. When we git out o' town I'm goin' to lick the stuffin' out o' yuh. I've warned yuh."

"Ye-ah."

The challenge given and accepted, the Runt resumed his expression of placid contentment, and to all appearances both men dismissed the episode of Frawg Hollow from their minds. They rode, as was their custom, without talking, slowly, saving their horses in the terrible heat, and made no move to halt until the sun was nearing the tops of the western mountains and they spied a grove of cottonwoods and willows standing out boldly in the wide expanse of sagebrush and cactus, marking one of the springs rare in this semi-arid country. A well marked trail led from the road and into this the horses, scenting water and rest, turned with quickening steps.

In the center of the grove a spring of clear water bubbled out of the ground, feeding a small stream which was swallowed by the thirsty earth soon after it left the shade of the trees. For some reason the space about the spring was devoid of growth except for a covering of coarse grass, and this open space was strewn with the miscellaneous litter of a popular camping place. The partners watered their horses, loosened cinches, tied the reins to a pair of saplings, then walked slowly and deliberately to the center of the clearing. The Runt threw his enormous hat on the ground. Long-un placed himself on guard as though he knew exactly what was coming. The yellow lights were flashing in the Runt's pale blue eyes, but Long-un showed only a grave interest in something he regarded as important.

The Runt began to move, slowly at first, circling around his partner and gradually drawing nearer. Ridiculous as he appeared in contrast with the giant length of his adversary, there was yet something lithe and smooth in his movements which carried the impression of incredible swiftness. This was confirmed an instant later when his body shot forward like a cannon ball, head lowered, a human battering ram. A man of wider girth hardly could have escaped the charge, but Long-un leaned swiftly to one side and, as the little man shot by, seized him by the shoulders, swung him back and planted him on his feet in his original position.

The Runt swore, and circling with greater speed, tried it again with the same result. He varied his attack by diving at Long-un's legs in a low tackle, but always missed by a hair. At last he drew back panting and almost blinded by the perspiration that was streaming off his face.

"Yore doin' better, Runt," drawled Long-un approvingly, "but yore jest a leetle slow on the take off."

"You great big gazabo," the little man retorted, still panting from his efforts, "if you'll saw them stilts off at the knees so's I kin reach yuh, I'll turn yuh inside out."

"Ye-ah," Long-un admitted the possibility, "but don't fergit what I'm tellin' yuh. Yore a leetle slow on the take off. Some day you'll make a miss an' go smashin' yore head agin a rock. Let's eat."

With one accord they went to the spring and took a long drink. The scrap, if it could be called by so serious a name, was finished and done, apparently forgotten. From their blanket rolls each produced a parcel wrapped in paper, and together they went to a fallen cottonwood and sat down side by side. Their meal was exceedingly simple. Long-un held in his hand part of a loaf of bread which he measured with a calculating eye. The Runt possessed a hunk of cheese. From time to time each reached out his contribution and the other broke off what he required.

They had scarcely begun eating when Long-un, without lifting his head, spoke in a louder tone than usual. "Better come an' set down, stranger," he said. "Ain't nobody goin' to hurt yuh."

FOR a full minute there was no sign of anyone to whom he could have spoken, then the bushes on the opposite side of the spring parted and a man came out. He made straight for the spring and threw himself down with such haste he appeared to be falling. Burying his face in the water he drank as though he could never get enough.

At last he rose to his feet and came

across the clearing with the slow faltering steps of a man utterly weary, and dropped to a seat on the ground at the partners' feet. He was a pitiable looking object. His face, covered with a stubble of black beard, was ghastly pale under its tan and streaked with perspiration and dust. The eyes had retreated far back in his head, but shone from their hollows with a fierce glare. From the time he left the spring his gaze had been fastened on the food in the partners' hands, and there it now remained fixed while his lips moved without making a sound. No word was spoken—the partners had regarded his approach with expressionless faces—but, at the same instant, bread and cheese were thrust into the man's trembling hands.

The poor starving wretch tried hard to eat slowly and hide his desperate plight, but the first mouthful broke down all restraint and he fell to on the food like a ravenous wolf, never pausing until it was gone to the last crumb he could recover from the ground. When he could find no more he lifted his eyes for the first time since he began to eat, and cast a shamefaced glance at the men on the log. "I'm sorry," he stammered, "but I was hungry."

"Ye-ah," Long-un assented.

"That's what grub is for," added the Runt.

The man's fierce haunting eyes studied the faces of the two men with a searching look, then getting stiffly to his feet he said with some warmth, "You're two dead game sports. I'd do the same for you. I'll be moving along."

"It'll be cooler after dark," Long-un suggested, but the man gave no sign of having heard him. The water and food seemed to have put some vigor in his weary frame, for he crossed the clearing with a fairly steady gait and disappeared through the trees, heading north.

For some time the partners sat without moving, then the Runt took from his pocket a folded paper which he spread on his knee. It was the handbill Long-un had picked up in Frawg Hollow and it was headed in large type:

WANTED FOR MURDER

$1000 REWARD

"Black eyes," Long-un drawled reflectively.

"Yep," the Runt responded.

"Hooked beak."

"Right."

"White scar on left nostril."

"Uh-huh."

"Little finger gone from right hand."

"Exactly."

"Name o' Buck Connor."

"You got it."

There was silence again during which the Runt slowly folded the paper and restored it to his pocket. Long-un spat with unerring aim at a fallen leaf and spoke again. "I reckon, like as not, the feller he done in, needed killin'."

"Mos' likely," the Runt agreed.

"A thousand dollars is a pile o' money."

"It is," the Runt allowed with a sigh.

"It might be a long time 'fore we git a job."

"It might; this is a bum cattle country."

Long-un chewed reflectively for a full minute and spat again. "We're broke," he said.

"We are," the Runt admitted with feeling.

"We got no more grub."

"Not a crumb."

There followed a few minutes of deliberative silence, then, as though moved by a single mind, the two men rose and went to their horses. They led them to water, tightened the cinches, filled their water bottles and bent down to take a last refreshing drink. They were getting to their feet when they became suddenly still, each resting on one knee, listening with strained attention to the sound of horses traveling fast and approaching from the south.

"Five," drawled Long-un.

"Six," the Runt declared.

"How do yuh make it?"

"One without shoes is runnin' off the road."

Long-un listened again and nodded approvingly at his partner. "You'm right," he said. "I got to hand it to you when it comes to hearin'."

With the strange unison which marked all their movements they retied their horses and returned to their seats on the log, where they remained silent and motionless watching through the trees the road from the south.

In a few moments the riders came into view. As the Runt had declared, an Indian was riding through the sage at the side of the road. Of the other five, the leader, who was galloping some

yards in front, was a heavy set man with enormous shoulders and a bull neck. He wore a silver star on his breast. Even at that distance there was no mistaking the burly form they had last seen floundering in the Frawg Hollow horse trough. Long-un looked down at the Runt and the Runt looked up at Long-un. One of the little man's eyes slowly closed in a solemn wink while Long-un lifted one eyebrow to a prodigious height, giving to his lean face a quizzical look no wink could produce. This ceremony performed, they turned again to watch the cavalcade leave the road and come at full speed along the trail to the spring.

The sheriff—as his star now proclaimed him—rode well into the clearing before he saw the men on the log. His face, already an angry red from riding in the heat, became purple when he recognized the oddly assorted pair. "What are you fellers doin' here?" he demanded, pulling his horse to a sudden stop.

Blue eyes and gray regarded him with the same grave curiosity, but neither man replied. Long-un cut a new supply of plug and the Runt began to roll a cigarette. A suppressed titter coming from the men who had drawn up behind the sheriff showed that others were recalling his involuntary bath, and it did not improve his temper. Getting down heavily from his horse he took a step nearer to the seated men and, slapping the star on his breast with a gesture of importance, he growled savagely, "I'm here on business an' you'd better answer questions or I got plenty o' ways o' makin' yuh. Have yuh seen anybody on foot up this way?"

Long-un reflected seriously for a moment and replied: "Ye-ah."

"When did yuh see him?"

"Might be an hour ago."

"Where?"

"I reckon 'twas 'bout three mile back."

The sheriff's face brightened as he rapped out the next question. "Which way was he goin'?"

"He 'peared to be goin' most every way there was," Long-un drawled. "He was chasin' a pig."

Long-un's solemn face seemed to deny any attempt at humor, but a loud snicker from the men behind sent the angry sheriff completely off his balance. He burst into a stream of blasphemy that threatened to choke him. His bloodcurdling threats of what he proposed to do to the unnamable things on the log left nothing to the imagination. Long-un waited patiently until he paused from the lack of breath—or perhaps it was vocabulary. Then, laying his hand on the Runt's shoulder, he drawled softly, "Don't talk so loud. My pardner don't like loud talkin'—it makes him nervous."

The sheriff glared at the pose which recalled so vividly his unpleasant experience of the afternoon. He started to make a lunge forward, then turned abruptly and with an oath ordered his men to dismount. "Connor ain't here," he said, "an' he can't git water nowhere else 'ceptin' at Frenchy's, an' he's got to have grub. He don't know we're followin' him an' he'll be hittin' there 'fore night. We'll wait here an' surround him after dark."

Long-un and the Runt remained quietly in their places, taking no apparent interest in the movements of the posse members while the latter prepared to make themselves comfortable. The Indian had kept apart from the others and for some time remained seated on the ground with his back against a tree. Suddenly his attention was attracted by something in the grass at his side. He rolled over on hands and knees to examine it more closely, then crawled through the bushes at the point where the stranger had come out. A few moments later he reappeared and approaching the sheriff began whispering in his ear.

As he listened the big man's eyes began to snap. Without waiting for the Indian to finish he sprang to his feet, and whipping out his gun he covered the two partners. "Boys," he shouted, "Connor's been here an' these bums know where he is. Pete, bring a rope an' tie 'em up. An' if you move," he added to the men on the log, "I'll put everlastin' daylight through yuh."

A sullen faced man with a crooked nose stepped out from the group who were now all on their feet, and advanced toward the fallen tree with a coil of rope in his hand. The sheriff, suspicious of some sudden move, stepped nearer. His fears were all centered on the lean giant who had manhandled him with such ease and he kept his gun pointed steadily at Long-un, watching him like a hawk.

His disregard of the insignificant Runt was fatal. Before Pete had covered half the distance across the clearing something like a piledriver hit the sheriff in the pit of his stomach and he went to the ground with the firm conviction that his whole abdomen and chest had caved in.

Over him the Runt appeared with the gun in his hand. "Put 'em up, you fellers," he ordered the astonished deputies. "I kin pick off yore buttons with this thing an', believe me, I'm goin' to shoot."

Every man put his hands in the air except Pete, who thought he was far enough out of direct range to take a chance. His gun came out with lightning speed, but before he could bring it up there came the sound of a shot and the gun spun out of his hand, to be picked up by Long-un.

The lesson was quite sufficient. The others remained quiet while Long-un removed their guns, broke them and took out the cartridges. After searching the men for spare ammunition, he put the empty guns back in their holsters. The whole thing was done with an ease and swiftness which justified suspicion that it had been gained by long experience.

"The horses!" called the Runt, but Long-un was already on the way to where they were tied. Possessing himself of a quirt, he led them one by one out of the grove, and laid on the lash with a vigor that sent them racing over the waste until they were swallowed up in a cloud of dust.

The sheriff was now sitting up, surprised at finding his breath had not left him permanently. He watched the unloading of the guns with glittering eyes. When he saw the last one emptied and had successfully dodged it, he sprang to his feet with a roar. "Jump 'em, boys!" he shouted. "They're a brace o' hold-ups."

The Indian had no mind to get mixed up in the white man's scrap, and retired to a safe distance. The other four sprang forward as one man, but two of them never came within reach of Long-un's arms. One met the Runt in full flight and promptly went into the discard. Another thought to get around to the rear of the giant, but felt himself seized by the ankles and lifted from the ground, then the earth rose with terrific force against the back of his head and he took no further interest in the battle.

Two of them reached their quarry—and for a long time afterwards wished they hadn't. They were seized by two terrible hands, swung far apart and crashed together with a sound as of cracking bones, then, one after the other, they were hurled at the valiant sheriff who had been lingering in the background. Both struck true and for the second time the big man went to ground convinced he would never breathe again.

Long-un and the Runt surveyed the field of battle with the sadness of philosophers oppressed by the foolishness of men.

DID yuh see it?" Long-un asked, speaking for the first time since the trouble began.

"Sure I seen it," the Runt replied.

"A sheriff ain't got no business with a hangman's noose on the end of his lariat."

"He ain't," the Runt agreed.

"The paper said dead or alive."

"It did."

"Looked like he thought he was goin' to euchre us out o' that thousand dollars."

"He ain't thinkin' much of anythin' just now," the Runt allowed with a grunt of satisfaction.

Nothing more was said. They rode steadily, the little pinto showing an astonishing ability to keep neck and neck with the big chestnut. The light was fading rapidly and both men were keenly searching the rolling waste dotted with sagebush, but it was not until they had traveled several miles they saw the dark figure of a man ahead of them on the road.

Although it was now quite dark they could see that the man staggered as he ran, floundering into the scrub as though he was half blinded. Twice he stumbled and fell to his knees, but struggled up and ran on with the wavering and heavy tread of a man at the point of exhaustion. The riders were close behind him when, glancing fearfully over his shoulder, the man stumbled again, fell and lay still.

In a second Long-un was off his horse and bending over him. He lay flat on his face and made no effort to move.

Long-un turned him over and looked down into the dark eyes, more sunken now than before and dulled by despair.

A faint gleam crept into them when they recognized the giant. "I thought you was after me," he explained in a hoarse whisper.

"There's five men back a ways—one of 'em wearin' a star—that's lookin' fer somebody," Long-un remarked casually. "Better climb up on the chestnut. He's used to carryin' double, an' we're goin' yore way."

The man tried to say something but could not. The reaction at this unbelievable stroke of luck had been so great he was deprived of the power of speech. Reviving hope brought back a remnant of strength to his exhausted body, but it was only with Long-un's help he managed to get on the chestnut's back.

"Hold him on, Runt," Long-un called as he lifted his leg over his saddle. The Runt pulled the man's arms down over his shoulders and grasped both his wrists with one hand. He felt the man shiver; the firm grip must have felt very much like manacles. The horses took up their steady lope, but now they were headed westward, toward the mountain range grown black against the faint afterglow of the sunset.

At the end of an hour they were still riding at the same steady pace, but a wide curve had turned their faces south, the mountains appearing very near on their right. The stranger rode with sagging shoulders and head drooping on his breast, held in place only by the Runt's firm hold on his wrists. They had been riding some time in the new direction when he raised his head and, after glancing at the mountains, turned to Long-un. "Do you know you're headin' straight for Frawg Hollow?" he asked.

"Ye-ah," Long-un replied.

The man stared at him a moment with eyes that were widening with an awful suspicion. "Do yuh know who I am?" he asked hoarsely.

"Name o' Buck Connor, I reckon."

"You're takin' me back?"

"Ye-ah," Long-un drawled, and after a pause he added, "That sheriff had a hangman's noose on his lariat."

The Runt felt the man shiver again. He was silent a moment, then said despairingly, "Yes, he'd hang me for sure if he got a chance. He won't take no risk of me gettin' off at a trial."

For a time the silence of the night was broken only by the steady thud of the horses' feet. The scorching heat of the day had been succeeded by a cool breeze that came to the riders laden with the pungent odor of the sage. The sky had filled with a million flashing gems, but there was no moon and the earth looked like a huge plain of blackness ending in that high dark wall at their right. Suddenly Connor spoke again. "I reckon there's a reward," he said.

"Ye-ah, it said dead or alive."

"I suppose you might as well git it as anybody," he said wearily. "I'd fight for it, but I can't—I'm all in."

His head fell forward and he rode the last stage of their journey like a man who had given up all hope and cared little about what might become of him. No one spoke again until, on mounting a long ridge, the lights of Frawg Hollow appeared far to their left.

As they rode down the slope Long-un broke the long silence. "I reckon the feller sure needed killin'," he drawled.

"He sure did," the Runt acquiesced with unnecessary emphasis.

"That's the gap we come through," said Long-un, waving his hand toward the v of light breaking the black wall in the west.

"That's him," the Runt agreed.

The same impulse acting in two minds pulled both horses to a stop. Long-un stepped out of his saddle and, putting his huge hands on Buck Connor's waist, lifted him bodily from the chestnut's back and set him down astride the pinto. "Do yuh know this country?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the bewildered Connor.

"That gap'll take yuh where they'll never find yuh. It's only twenty mile an' the pinto'll take yuh fifty if yuh ride him easy. Hold tight!"

He struck the pinto a stinging blow with the flat of his hand. The startled horse shot ahead and in a moment became only a dark blur. Long-un followed him with a somber gaze until horse and rider were swallowed up in the dark background of the mountains; then he climbed leisurely on the chestnut's back.

"The pinto wa'n't never my size anyhow," he remarked as they turned their faces again toward the north.

"He sure was a leetle small," the Runt agreed.

A One Man Job

By

George Bruce Marquis

Author of "Old Bat Jennison Plays His Hunch," etc.

In Sour Dough town, when the gold went down, the Death Bones fell on craps; but Bat come there with his peaceful air, for to meet them bandit chaps. They missed his eyes, seein' jest his size—there wa'n't so much of that—but he weighed a *ton* with a Colt six-gun, old smoke-eatin', out-o'-hell Bat!

SIM BEAUMONT, the agent at Acme for the Adams Express Company, greeted Bat Jennison's tardy arrival with a sigh of relief. "Bat," he grumbled, "I told Milt to tell you to hurry."

"This is hurrying, for me," Jennison grinned.

"If that's hurryin'," Beaumont declared witheringly, "then a snail's a racehorse."

"I'd 'a' developed more speed," Old Bat assured him, "had your order per Milt carried a mite more specification. What's your sweat, anyway?"

"Come in here and I'll tell you," Beaumont answered as he led the way into his office and carefully closed the door.

A man sitting in Beaumont's rickety chair arose at their entrance. He was a stranger to Jennison but Beaumont proceeded to make them acquainted. "Mr. Hildebrand," said he, "here's the man I was telling you of, Bat Jennison."

He turned to Jennison to explain. "Mr. Hildebrand is division superintendent of the express company. He wants to talk to you."

The superintendent's big hand closed on Jennison's thin sinewy fingers in a firm grip, while his sharp brown eyes met the steady gray eyes of the little man in a long glance of keen appraisal, then traveled with a sweeping movement over the lean, well knit body.

Jennison detected just a shade of disappointment in that searching inventory, and he resented it. "You're remarking to yourself," he suggested coldly, "that I ain't quite up to the bill of lading."

The swift intuition of the little man evoked a gasp of astonishment on the part of the other. "Your surmise is partially correct," he admitted frankly, "but your uncanny way of calling it makes me change my mind. I can believe now 'most everything Beaumont has said about you."

"Sim talks a lot with his mouth," Jennison chuckled, "and he's sure careless the way he shovels the truth around."

"Look here, Bat," Beaumont objected in an injured tone, "that ain't no way to talk. All I suggested to Mr. Hildebrand about you is the gospel truth. I just give him the bare facts about your litt'e shindy over at Harmony. He's got a job for you."

"Like that one?" Jennison queried with mild curiosity.

"Yes and no," the other replied. "Mr. Hildebrand will tell you, and you can draw your own conclusions then."

Jennison sat down on the edge of the counter and lighted his redolent pipe. This accomplished to his satisfaction he addressed Hildebrand. "Proceed with your snake killin'," he advised him simply.

The division superintendent chuckled softly at his quaint way of putting things. "I guess you'll do, Mr. Jennison," he said in a satisfied way. "That

is, providing you're willing to undertake it."

Old Bat did not see fit to comment upon the problematical job, and after a pause, the superintendent proceeded.

"Do you know the Sour Dough Placer?" he inquired.

"On the Salmon River, ain't it?" Old Bat puffed around the stem of his pipe.

The other nodded. "It's a new camp," he continued, "and mighty rich. They're shipping out a lot of dust. You see," he explained, "a group of men with money went in there and bought out about half the claims. We're under contract to carry out the dust for them."

"Incidents occurred?" Old Bat suggested quizzically. "'Pears like I heard that the robbers yanked considerable ingenuity into their performance."

"They certainly did," Hildebrand agreed grimly. "Simply ambushed the stage twice, shot the driver and guard in cold blood, to say nothing of a passenger or two and a span of horses, to boot. Since then they've had to post a notice that the stages were not carrying any treasure, in order to get a man to drive one."

"Can't blame a man much," Jennison observed philosophically.

"Of course not," Hildebrand nodded, "but on the other hand, we've simply got to move the gold dust. Beaumont suggested you."

"Thanks, Sim," Jennison said dryly.

"Are you willing to try it?" the division superintendent continued. "I can make it worth your while."

"Should I draw a lead ace, which seems likely," Old Bat mused, "how much would I be ahead?"

"You don't care to risk it then?" Hildebrand queried in a disappointed tone.

"On the contrary," Jennison answered quietly, "some way it kinda appeals to me. It's a one man job, as she looms up and I figgers I'm elected."

He sat for a moment in silence, sucking at his dead pipe. "What I want is a letter to your agent at Sour Dough," he announced presently, "to turn over the gold dust to me. I'll do the rest."

An hour later armed with the letter addressed to William Tuggle, the express agent at Sour Dough, Jennison set out. He was riding his own saddle horse, a wiry, vicious looking roan, renowned for his sagacity and endurance. His initial destination was the town of Walla Walla, lying about thirty miles north and east of Acme. He reached it along late in the afternoon and after putting up his horse in his unostentatious way, proceeded to develop some needed information concerning the new mining camp at Sour Dough. What he learned, to a less seasoned man would have given serious cause for reflection. For this mushroom camp already had acquired a sinister reputation for crime and bloodshed which set it far beyond its fellows—even in a region where these things were common enough. Jennison listened carefully but was not disturbed, and that night he slept with all the careless abandon of an unvexed child.

Sun-up the following morning found him on his way. Sour Dough lay almost directly south of Walla Walla and well back in the Blue Mountains. The distance by stage route between the two points was roughly estimated at forty miles. Within two miles of Walla Walla, the narrow road entered the splayed-out mouth of a deep canyon, the sinuous windings of which were followed until the canyon finally pinched out almost at the outskirts of the mining camp. An untouched forest of pine and fir lined the bottom of the canyon and extended far up its sides, furnishing an almost continuous screen for the work of holdup artists. Jennison noted all of this with a practical eye as he pushed his horse up the twisting roadway.

About fourteen miles from Walla Walla he passed a rude stage stand where changes were made in the teams. Some five or six miles farther he came upon a low rambling log house of considerable size, bearing over the door in crude letters the legend, ZEKE BUNTON'S RODE HOUSE. In the doorway slouched a huge, black bearded giant with lowering eye and unlovely, scowling face.

At sight of the man, Jennison reined up his horse and accosted him. "What's the chances for a drink?" he queried.

The big man regarded him steadily for a moment before he answered, "I sells it."

"And I drinks it," asserted Jennison just as shortly, as he slid from his horse and approached the door.

The other moved leisurely inside with

Jennison trailing at his heels. The room was almost square, with puncheon floor and unsmoothed log walls. Across part of one end was a bar and behind it a couple of rough shelves displaying a disordered array of bottles. Two men were inside, draped over the bar, both drunk and argumentative.

A hard pair Jennison decided at the first glance, a judgment which a lengthier inspection did not tend to abate in the slightest. One was short and squat, his face concealed by a smudge of black beard, matted beyond words. His arms, disproportionately long, still looked decidedly capable, as did huge, gnarly hands dangling far beyond the confines of his dirty shirt cuffs. He wore a Colt revolver with an easy grace which spoke eloquently of his long and intimate acquaintance with that species of hardware.

His companion was not so unlike him, except that he was taller by some inches, perhaps younger, and—if possible—dirtier.

Jennison's entrance held for them but a passing moment's interest, and favoring him with but a brief stare as he stepped up to the bar they continued a discussion which his entrance had interrupted. "I'm tellin' yuh, Blub," the shorter of the two stated with owlish gravity, "that you're all wrong. Dill never slipped in his calculations. You oughta remember——"

The other cut him off at this point. "Remember!" he repeated witheringly. "Why, Dill says to me, says he, 'Streatch, that's the one time I stubbed my toe.'" He turned to the man behind the bar. "Ain't them his prezact words Zeke?" he demanded triumphantly. "You heard him."

Bunton's answer was a model of swift directness. "Too much blab," he growled, and then he did a thing that amazed Jennison by its revelation of his tremendous strength. Reaching across the narrow bar he grasped the two men in his great hands, swept them clear of the floor and crashed their heads together with a resounding thud. Now unlocking his giant fingers from their collars, he dropped them unconcernedly to the floor where they lay stunned and bleeding from nose and mouth.

"Well, now," Old Bat remarked dryly, "you've sure got ways about you, Mr. Bunton."

"You've got to have with a pair of swill kegs like Blub and Streatch," the other answered dispassionately. "What'll you have?"

Old Bat drank his whisky, then with one searching investigative glance at the two disreputables coming to a groaning consciousness on the floor, he left the room, mounted his pony and proceeded on his way.

Two or three miles farther on, he came upon the scene of one of the holdups; and in fact his keen nose picked up the scent of the dead stage horse long before he reached the spot.

The point chosen was a tiny level space connecting two steep slopes, curtained on both sides by a heavy fringe of trees and bushes, and altogether admirable for the purpose.

As Old Bat sat his horse in the narrow road his alert mind drew a sharp picture of the holdup—the laboring stage team, the sudden fusillade from ambush, the guard and driver pitching from their seats, a horse down, all followed by swift robbery and the retreat of the outlaws. His lean jaw snapped tight. "The murdering devils!" he muttered. "Bat, you'd sure better keep your weather eye peeled."

A few miles on, Jennison passed the other stage stand, leaving him but about a dozen miles more before he would reach Sour Dough.

Three hours later and the road climbed out of the flattened end of the canyon and he found himself within rifle shot of his destination. Drawing up his horse he studied the camp with some care. A double row of cabins straggled up the flat valley, and between them ran a little mountain stream known as Paint Creek. The town exhibited usual frontier architecture, log houses, tents and a scattering combination of both, the latter usually saloons and dance halls.

Presently Bat rode on into town, all the while keeping an eye out for the express office. It proved to be a double roomed log cabin about midway of the single street. With it located he passed on until he reached the corral and barn of the stage station. Here he dismounted, and throwing his reins to a bewhiskered runt of a man greatly inclined to garrulity, he strolled nonchalantly back

down the street. Reaching the express office he stepped in at the open door.

A tall thin man with a droll cast in one eye was the sole occupant of the dirty office whom Jennison proceeded to accost. "I'm looking for William Tuggle," he announced.

"You're looking *at* 'im," the other corrected, and he chuckled at his feeble joke.

Jennison had chosen to assume the name James Hood which once had stood him in good stead at Harmony, Oregon, on a not very dissimilar venture. Accordingly, he introduced himself.

"My name's Jim Hood," he stated. "I've a letter for you from Mr. Hildebrand."

He passed it over to Tuggle and watched the latter with covert interest as he perused it. Folding it up, the agent passed it back to Jennison with the dry question, "Your experience been very numerous, Mr. Hood?"

"Well," Jennison parried, "I'm expecting to add to the collection right off sudden."

"You sure will," Tuggle nodded emphatically. Then he added a question, "Will you want to start tonight?"

Bat shook his head at the question. "Not till morning," he informed Tuggle, "and I ain't settled on the hour as per yet. Will it make any difference to you?"

"None whatsoever," the agent assured him. "I live in the back room here. All you'll hafta do is to hammer on the door. I'll hear you after a while, though I'm bound to state that me and sleep are sure on good terms."

At the end of a considerable conversation Jennison started to leave but halted with the question: "Which is the best hotel?"

"There ain't no such animal," Tuggle asserted, "but the Gray Squirrel's got the best liquor."

"Me for the Gray Squirrel," Jennison grinned. "Do they serve pine nuts, now I wonder?"

"They sure do," Tuggle responded in kind, "and Bowie knives to crack 'em with."

Jennison secured accommodations of a sort at the alleged hotel, ate his supper, and then set out to investigate the denizens of the camp. Quite naturally he entered the barroom.

Strung along one side of the smoke blackened room were a half dozen faro tables, two of the games already in full blast. Nearby, a rat faced gambler displayed his jugglery throwing three card monte. In one corner, at a table heaped high with chips and gold dust, four miners were playing stud poker. Extending half across one end of the room was a rough board bar, behind which was entrenched an elongated, smiling man, greeted by the hilarious and sober alike as "Splinter."

Jennison walked over to the bar and fell to watching the constantly changing crowd, the players, the dealers and the hangers-on. Finally he turned to the genial barkeeper to ask a question; but a sudden hubbub just outside the street door prevented it. The next moment a man swaggered in, shouldered his way truculently through the crowd, and halted at the bar. Presently his roving bloodshot eye lighted on Old Bat and instantly picked him out as new to the town. He stepped nearer.

"Wart," he addressed the other contemptuously, "Sour Dough allus drinks at the expense of the pilgrim. Call up the house!"

Jennison turned about with deliberation and surveyed him at some length; not a big man particularly, yet tall and rangy, a stubble of grayish beard too sparse to conceal his crooked, ugly mouth, pouched, unblinking eyes with a network of wrinkles at the corners. So much the first glance told him. Next he noted the lean, dirty hands, corded and hairy, noticed that one loitered near the handle of a revolver thrust conveniently into the waistband of his trousers; saw, too, that the handle was scarred with notches, and knew that he had run foul of a professional gunman. Accordingly his heart rejoiced.

"Well?" came the challenge again, sharper and more incisive.

"Well, what?" Jennison inquired innocently. "I guess I didn't quite catch the drift of your remarks. You see I'm kinda hard of hearin'. Did you introduce yourself or something?"

Now it had been many a day since the killer had met a man with the temerity to question him openly, and he was in small mood for trifling. The blood pounded through the veins in his neck and mottled his face. His eyes narrowed, and the fingers of his right hand twitched threateningly.

"You're toyin' with Dill Gantz!" he snarled. "Call up the house!"

Old Bat's face was instantly wreathed in a vacuous smile. "I'm Jim Hood," he announced happily, "and I'm sure glad to meet you Mr. Pants. I knowed a man in Californy once," he prattled on, "whose name was Adam Vest. A-Dam Vest, the boys usta call him. You're name ain't Adam, now is it, Mr. Pants? Say," he chuckled loudly, "if we had that man Vest here, you and me and him would be a purty good starter for a clothing store, now wouldn't we?"

Gantz regarded Old Bat in blank astonishment for a stupefied second, but a gurgle of delight from a bystander aroused him to blank fury.

"Why you little flea-bitten worm!" he bellowed, "I'll squash you under my heel! I'll——"

Jennison, in a highly original way, cut the tirade off at this point. He was standing by the bar with his left hand drumming idly upon its slippery top. Here in their aimless wanderings his fingers encountered a pool of brandy and now cautiously dipping their tips in the spilled liquor, he flipped it with precision into the killer's eyes. So assaulted, they lidded shut and in that split second Jennison with a dazzling motion drew two guns and covered Gantz and his crew of sycophants, among whom he recognized the nondescripts Blub and Streatch of his roadhouse acquaintance.

"Mr. Pants," he purred, when that worthy had swabbed his rheumy eyes to the point of hazy vision, "you said something a minute ago about squashing a worm. Do you want me to lay down or can you do it just as well with me standin' up?"

Gantz and his satellites, frozen into inaction by the pair of guns, presented a ludicrous appearance which aroused Old Bat's risibilities. A slow grin overspread his features. "You're thinking, likely," he suggested, "that things ain't just what they sometimes seem—and you're dead right, too. Git this straight now. I notice you carry a gun with some notches on the handle. Should you let your dirty paw stroll down toward that said handle, you've whittled your last notch. And now turn around, the whole bunch of you and skedaddle. You sorta spile the air in this here saloon."

The menace in his cold level tones made for obedience, but not before Gantz with an ugly outthrust of his jaw had snarled venomously. "Old man, you've got the whip hand right now, but there'll come another time, and don't you forgit it!"

As they disappeared through the door, a man sidled up to Jennison's elbow and whispered warningly, "Don't look at me, Jim Hood, but listen now. 'Tis Dennis Fleharty. I'll be leavin' soon. Follow me."

Dennis Fleharty! How Old Bat's heart leaped at the brogue of the honest Irishman! Fleharty had been his staunch supporter at Harmony, Oregon, where Jennison had cleaned up that wild camp at the behest of Sheriff Colby.

He watched Fleharty from the tail of his eye and when the Irishman strolled out of the saloon, Jennison followed unobtrusively. Immediately from across the street there came the flash of a gun and a bullet thudded into the log wall just skimming Jennison's head. A fractional second later Jennison had drawn his revolver and began raking the shadows on either side of the front where the flame had licked viciously out of the darkness.

A wild yell proved that his judgment was good and when the crowd that came milling out of the saloons, drawn by the shots, had crossed the street, they found a man threshing about on the ground with a punctured shoulder.

A hand was laid on Jennison's arm and a familiar voice chuckled exultingly: "Bedad, 'tis the same Jim Hood. Come wid me now whilst they be investigatin' the damage done."

Fleharty's cabin was one of the last of the string on the Walla Walla road; and as they plodded through the dust Jennison could not help thinking of the fortunate meeting. Here was a man he could trust and one likely, too, amply informed of Sour Dough and its undesirable citizens. When they entered the cabin Fleharty carefully barred the door and windows before he lighted a stub of candle thrust in the neck of the omnipresent beer bottle.

With the lighting Fleharty turned and grasped Jennison's lean fingers in his big freckled fist. "Jim Hood," he laughed, "'tis a salve for sore eyes to see ye this once again. And tell me

now," he continued, "what brings ye here to this misbegotten bog uv sin and iniquity?"

Jennison without preliminaries explained his mission, while Fleharty listened, brows knit in a puzzled expression of amazement and perplexity. "To ye, Jim Hood," he remarked at length, "'tis all in the day's work, I'm supposin', but to anny other man 'twould be a job left high and dry on the shelf."

"But somebody's got to do it," Jennison argued.

Fleharty nodded in agreement. "'Tis true, no doubt," he admitted, "but I dunno." Then he brightened. "Still, whin I remember phat a red hot stew there was at Harmony and how ye cooled it off, I'm believin' ye'll do it here, despite the odds against ye."

"Thanks," Old Bat said dryly, "and now tell me what you know about this man Gantz."

"A bad man," Fleharty declared with an ominous shake of his head. "He and his gang ride far and work not at all, but they have the dust."

"Holdup work?" Jennison questioned.

"'Tis very like," the other nodded. "Still, no man knows."

"I guess that it is up to me to find out that little thing," Jennison remarked after a pause.

"Have a care," Fleharty warned him.

Daylight found Jennison tapping at the door of the express office. Following a certain delay the touseled head of William Tuggle appeared at the single window. Then the door was unbarred and he invited Jennison to come in. Old Bat dropped his bridle reins to the ground and lifting a brand new canteen from the saddle horn, followed the agent into the office.

Tuggle busy with the safe glanced up as Jennison entered and his shrewd eye measured the canteen briefly. "It will hold about fifty pounds of dust," he appraised, "which means you'll be totin' about twelve thousand dollars."

"About the way I figured," Jennison nodded. "Anyway, weigh out that much and we'll see."

When the fifty pounds of gold dust had been poured down into the receptacle, Jennison declared it sufficient.

"Which way are you traveling?" Tuggle asked carelessly.

Jennison looked at him a moment before answering. "I ain't no goat," he declared finally. "A plain road's good enough for me."

Tuggle did not pursue the subject further but, following Old Bat outside, watched him while he straddled the canteen across the horn of his saddle and settled it in place.

"Pretty snug," he declared. "Well, good luck and so long."

"So long," Jennison replied as he swung into the saddle and pointed his horse down the street.

Not a person was in sight as he pushed out into the stage road, yet he had a feeling that in all likelihood his exit was not so unnoticed as it appeared. Both by nature and arduous experience a man of caution, he gave scant heed to the beauty of the morning but concentrated his attention upon the narrow ribbon of road as it unrolled its curves in and out among the trees and bushes.

Four miles out of Sour Dough, he pulled his horse to a stop. Here, according to Fleharty's earnest advice, he would leave the road and follow a shorter route to Walla Walla. It was a mere trail at best, winding its inconspicuous way up the side of the canyon.

Old Bat discreetly left the road a good hundred yards before the trail branched off, nor did he enter the trail itself for a like distance beyond its intersection with the stage road.

A half mile of steady climbing lifted him far above the level of the canyon floor and gave him a rather extensive outlook toward Sour Dough. His eyes rested for a moment on the road where, like a loop of yellow tape, it circled the tip of a rock slide a good mile back. Momentarily he held the point in view, then shifted to a hazy web of yellowish dust rising above the road somewhat farther back. Too early for the stage Jennison reflected; and still, that telltale film of dust wrote a very legible message for his keen eyes.

Dismounting he drew his horse behind a sheltering service berry bush and turned his attention to the back trail. Directly his curiosity was satisfied, for around the bend swept a half dozen horsemen, their mounts at a hard gallop. Never pausing at the off-branching trail, they went pounding on down the canyon as if in a violent hurry to overtake someone; and Jennison, smiling grimly to himself, had little doubt

but that he was the magnet drawing them on. While they were too far away for his recognition, he had a feeling of certainty that the tall man riding in the lead was Dill Gantz.

When they were out of sight, he climbed back into the saddle and set out once more. Some time later he noticed that his pony was limping in the right front foot. Concluding that a stone had lodged in the frog, Old Bat got down, picked up the foot, then dropped it with an exclamation of annoyance. The shoe was gone—and he had had new shoes nailed on at Walla Walla!

"That blacksmith's sure goin' to hear from me," he grumbled. He paused abruptly as a suspicion formed suddenly in his mind. Hastily picking up the other forefoot he studied it with care, then slowly let it down. The fault was not after all with the Walla Walla blacksmith as the inspection demonstrated. A good half of the nails had been drawn from the shoe, and the clinched down toehold of the other filed off smooth with the hoof!

The reason was crystal clear to Old Bat. His horse would cast both shoes and inevitably go lame, making speed impossible. His mind reverted to the group of horsemen spurring down the road, and he had not a shadow of a doubt but that the two occurrences were linked together.

Just about dusk, atop a limping horse, Jennison entered Walla Walla, and going direct to the express office, turned over his gold dust to the agent. His next move was to put up his saddle pony at a feed stable run by an oldtime friend, before he thought of his own needs.

Supper finished, he set out to inspect the saloons and gambling houses, being rather curious to know if Gantz and his men were in town. He was not left long in doubt on this point, for at the third saloon he found them grouped together at the end of the bar. Jennison entered unobtrusively, his object being to study them at close range without putting them on their guard.

A glance showed him that they were in an ugly humor, a fact that caused him to chuckle softly to himself. Giving little heed to the jostling, good humored crowd around them, they were drinking steadily in a morose and moody silence. Jennison was speculating idly as to their particular brand of nerve when that question was answered for him in a most emphatic manner.

A crescendo of sound outside was suddenly transmuted into a riotous eruption of men headed by a big, flushed face giant, plainly drunk and evidently in a quarrelsome mood. Jennison recognized him instantly as a tough known as Two Gun Cassidy, a hard citizen and general all around bad man. His roistering followers were of the same ilk; and Old Bat settled himself comfortably to enjoy the fun which he felt certain was forthcoming.

Well inside the room Cassidy halted and reviewed the crowd with a contemptuous glance. Then, squaring his shoulders, he bellowed, "I'm a wild bull from the alkali flats! I'm pawin' up the dust and hungerin' for trouble! Who's goin' to accommodate me?"

He paused for an answer while one of his followers cut in evilly, "Crowd 'em Two Gun!" he urged. "Make 'em crawl! Make 'em crawl!"

"Crowd 'em?" Cassidy mouthed witheringly as once more he swept the silent crowd with a scornful look. "What's the use? They ain't got no more guts than a band of scabby sheep!" And he spat on the floor to give emphasis to his statement.

The men in the saloon had fallen back from the intruder, with the sole exception of Gantz and his group who, through the tirade, had held their original place at the bar. Cassidy's roving bloodshot eye noted this and he advanced upon them with a look of pleased expectancy. "You're my mutton!" he announced. "It'll make me kinda happy to hear you blat."

As he strode forward, Gantz and his men spread out slightly and Jennison, watching the drama with interest, reflected that they now had elbow room. Even at that, he was hardly prepared for what followed, for Gantz taking advantage of the tense silence replied to the taunting words.

"You whisper," he observed icily, "that you're a wild bull. Well, my judgment is this! You're nothing but a sway-backed ring boned, wind broken jackass! All you've got left is the bray!"

"Them words sure calls for smoke," Jennison communed with himself. The

thought was lightning fast yet scarcely more rapid than Gantz's next move. For tripping on his words he swept a gun out and upward, accompanying it with a catlike spring that brought him to Cassidy's side. Pushing a revolver within an inch of the other's nose he added coldly: "If I didn't think so much of this six-gun, I'd make you eat it. You a bad man! You a wild bull, hunting trouble! I snigger to grin!"

Reaching over with his disengaged hand he seized Cassidy's beard and rocked his head from side to side. This accomplished to his satisfaction he slid his gun back into his holster and stepped back a pace, still alert and watchful.

There followed a moment of deathlike silence, then with a roar the storm broke. Cassidy half pulled his two guns and collapsed, drilled neatly through the forehead. When the battle ended a half dozen of his followers, sprawled on the saloon floor, testified to the deadly accuracy of Gantz and his men.

Of his six men, two had met a like fate but their leader had come through unscathed.

As Jennison reviewed his encounter with Gantz only the night before, he slowly shook his head. "Bat," he declared to himself, "I figgers you musta had him mesmerized. There ain't no other explanation to it."

The following day, riding a new saddle horse, he returned to Sour Dough. When he rode up to the express office, Tuggle greeted him warmly. "You didn't have no trouble a-tall?" he inquired in a casual way.

"On the contrary," Old Bat informed him. "Should I?"

"Some do." Tuggle said shortly.

"Not me," Jennison declared. "Should I see trouble loomin' up, I flits. That's my way of going *through* it—I goes 'round."

"That's sure the best way," Tuggle agreed. Then he drifted to another question. "Goin' to try it ag'in tomorrow?"

"I ain't decided," Old Bat answered. "Mebby so. Mebby not. I'll let you know later."

Fleharty greeted Jennison's appearance at his cabin with a riotous welcome. Nothing would do until his guest had related in detail his trip, as well as the battle at Walla Walla between Gantz and Two Gun Cassidy.

"Jim Hood," he said earnestly at the end of the recital, "I'm thinking 'tis Gantz wid whom ye'll deal in the end, and him mortal fast wid his gun."

"You've said it," Old Bat agreed emphatically. "I've got first hand evidence of that fact. Still," he added comfortably, "he ain't the only pebble on the beach."

"'Tis true," Fleharty nodded, "In a fair standup fight ye'd best him. But I'm fearin' 'twill not be that kind of a shindy."

"Well," Jennison declared with grim emphasis, "the things are not going to be long delayed if my plan works out. Listen now and I'll explain it to you."

Fleharty obeyed though at times he interrupted to ask an anxious question.

"'Tis a wild scheme," he gave as his opinion when Old Bat had finished, "and wid anny other man, I'd say 'twas impossible; but you're diffrunt. It may be that ye'll succeed."

As a preliminary Fleharty journeyed townward after supper, returning an hour or so later with the good news that Gantz and the remainder of his gang had returned from Walla Walla.

"'Tis plain to be seen," he declared with sparkling eyes, "that their trip was not a success."

"Too dull mebby," Old Bat chuckled softly. "Here's hopin' it'll be livelier next time."

IT WAS well after one o'clock the next day before Jennison appeared at the express office. Tuggle noted his approach in unemotional fashion but as the gold dust was being stowed away in the canteen Jennison dropped a remark that aroused him enough to draw the question.

"You're staying at Zeke Bunton's Road House tonight?"

"That's my notion," Old Bat affirmed. "Nothing against that place is there?"

"Not a thing," Tuggle assured him emphatically. "Should you need help or anything Bunton'll be there right at your back."

"You mean," Jennison suggested dryly, "that he'll stand at my back 'till my belly's beat blue?"

"Not much," Tuggle protested vigorously. "Should you yell for help, he'll come a-runnin'."

"I'll remember them kind words,"

Jennison chuckled as he slid into the saddle and gathered up his reins. "Well, so long."

"So long," the agent responded heartily, "and a bushel of good luck."

When Jennison reached Fleharty's cabin, he pulled up his horse and dismounted. A moment he hesitated as if weighing some heavy matter, then apparently coming to a decision he swung the canteen from the saddle horn and carried it into the cabin. His stay was brief, and in a few moments he was back bringing the heavy receptacle with him. Settling it firmly astride the saddle horn he was off again. He seemed in an unusually happy frame of mind, for at times he hummed a cowboy melody of dubious morals and dislocated harmony.

It was approaching dusk when he reached the road-house. Bunton himself received him, even going to the length of leading the way in person to the low log stable.

While Bunton was filling the pole manger with an abundant supply of blue joint, Jennison unsaddled and watered his horse then with the canteen safely in hand he followed Bunton back to the road-house. It seemed so utterly deserted that Jennison was moved to inquire casually of Bunton if this was an unusual condition.

"It goes steady by jerks, like a frog a-walkin'." Bunton replied in picturesque phraseology. "Sometimes she's jammed to the steeple and then ag'in it's like this, empty as a last year's bird nest."

"It don't make no diffrunce to me," Old Bat said carelessly. "Fact is, the only thing I'm interested in right now is getting outside some provender."

"My Chink cook will fix you up," the other assured him. "What vittles do you crave?"

"Ham and aigs," Jennison answered promptly. "If you ain't got no aigs, double the ration of ham."

With the canteen leaning against the leg of his bench, Jennison ate his supper and for dessert lighted his ancient brier.

Presently his host wandered in and sitting down on the bench produced a sooty bowled corn cob equal in odor to Old Bat's but further advanced toward senility and decay. "I reckon," he remarked between puffs, "that you'll want to bed down purty sudden."

"I'll be ready to perform that little job soon as I finish this pipe of stable sweepin's."

"I figgered as much," the other nodded; "and seein' as you're the only pilgrim here, I guess you'll have plenty of room. There's a dozen bunks in thar to pick from," and with his pipe stem, he indicated a big single room, its jumbled interior plainly in view through an open door.

But Old Bat demurred at the suggestion. "I'd like a kinda private place," he said cautiously, as his eye wandered to the plethoric canteen.

Bunton nodded understandingly. "Let me see," he meditated and he puffed slowly for a time lost in the intricacies of thought. "I believe I can fix you up," he declared at length, "though it ain't much of a layout. Come on and look at it," he bade the other, "and see what you think."

Jennison picked up his jealously guarded burden, and followed his host out into the big barroom. Here at one side was a door which Bunton kicked open, then, holding a lighted candle aloft, he motioned Old Bat forward.

It was a smelly low ceilinged room, perhaps ten feet by four, its single outside opening barricaded with a heavy wooden shutter.

"How come that blood on the floor?" Old Bat queried as he pointed to an irregular splotch well inside the door.

"I uses it for a storehouse sometimes," Bunton answered. "That blood dripped outen a quarter of beef I had hung here day afore yesterday. I'll mop it up with a sack, should it worry you."

"Blood don't never worry me," Jennison assured him promptly, "'ceptin' it's mine."

"That does make a whale of a diffrunce," Bunton chuckled. "Figgers you'll bunk here?"

"Sure thing," Jennison assured him. "Bring me a half dozen blankets and a candle and I'll be as snug as them three bugs under the rug I usta read about when I was a little shaver."

"Blamed if I don't remember that tale, too," Bunton laughed. "First reader, wasn't it?"

"That or the primer," Jennison pondered. "I disremember which."

The proprietor clumped away, returning presently with an armload of

frowsy blankets which he dumped down unceremoniously on the equally dirty floor. Jennison kicked them into some semblance of a bed. The other meanwhile lighted his efforts with the flickering candle.

"Do you want to gargle a drink?" he queried as Old Bat straightened up after a last leisurely prod at the begrimed blankets. Jennison reflected a long moment before he answered regretfully, too, as he admitted to himself: "I guess I'll hafta pass that said invite. Drinkin' sometimes keeps me awake, and I'm figgerin' on poundin' my ear some tonight."

"It acts thataway with some," Bunton nodded sagely. "Well, goodnight and happy dreams, as the feller says."

"Goodnight," Jennison said in turn, "and the same to you."

When the diminuendo of footsteps had passed out of the barroom Old Bat closed the door, dropped the heavy bar in place and pulled the latchstring inside. The heavy shutter was secured by a similar bar; but before dropping it into the cleats Jennison blew out his candle and cautiously swung the shutter open.

He found that the window sill was a scant two feet from the ground and that that window had been cut in the rear wall of the house A crescent moon well down toward the western canyon wall illuminated the narrow canyon with a feeble light just sufficient to show that trees grew up to within a dozen feet of the building. Leaning well out he studied the surroundings with care. Finally with the detailed picture indelibly printed in his mind, he closed the shutter and dropped the retaining bar in place. Then without relighting his candle he softly drew off his boots and stretched himself out on the pallet, but not to sleep.

Two hours passed, and then Jennison became conscious of the drone of voices, a faint sound that became increasingly more distinct. Presently he heard a loud hammering on the outside door, repeated with growing insistence and quelled in time by Bunton's growling inquiry.

"What the hell you tryin' to do, wake everybody in the house?"

"We're tryin' to rouse the ramrod of this here road-house," a voice in the dark explained to him bluntly. "There's a half dozen of us and we want lodgin' for the night. What's the chances?"

"Not a chance," the ladlord informed his interlocutor promptly. "I'm jammed up to the rafters. You'll hafta lope along."

"Lope, hell!" another man cut in explosively. "I ain't got no hide left on my feet. I'm meanin' to stop with you tonight."

"Guess ag'in," Bunton retorted. "I've done told you I didn't have no more room."

"Why can't you make room?" the first speaker argued. "This is a public house ain't it, for the entertainment of travelers and sich?"

"She's a public house all right," the hotel keeper admitted, "but she ain't made of India rubber. When she's full, she's full and that's the end of it. Sorry gents, but you hafta hoof it a mite furder on."

"How fur?" some one asked hopefully.

Bunton considered the question a moment. "A matter of three miles mebby," he replied guardedly. "Mebby three and a half."

Following this fabrication which fortunately for him was unknown to the men outside, there came to Old Bat the buzz of conversation as the footsore travelers debated the problem. Finally they succumbed to the inevitable, for Jennison heard them trudging away, though the night air bore back for some time lurid injunctions to the obdurate innkeeper to migrate forthwith to a climate usually regarded as more than tropical. Nor could he refrain from chuckling softly to himself at Bunton's insistence that the road-house was full.

"Bat," he confided to himself, "you're sure hell for size to cram this here deadfall thataway. Goliath an' Samson ain't in it with you! On the contrary."

He cautiously lighted a match and consulted his open faced silver watch. "Eleven-thirty," he muttered. "My guess is you better be movin' shortly if you move under your own steam."

Yet it was a good half hour later before he put the contemplated move into execution. Very stealthily he unbarred the window and cautiously swung the heavy shutter open, then pushing his head out slowly he peered about. The reconnoiter seemed to prove that every-

thing was serene, so after a certain delay he carefully lowered his boots to the ground, next a couple of blankets, after which he climbed out himself. Leaving the canteen in the room, he closed the shutter tight, and, gathering up the boots and blankets, made his way along the side of the house and thence to a clump of nearby trees.

Treading gingerly because of his tender feet he entered the shadows, and, gathering the blankets about him, sat down with his back braced against the bole of a big fir. The position he had taken was on the side nearest to Sour Dough and within a dozen feet of the stage road. First making certain that his guns were handy, he settled himself to wait for events, with a patience born of long years of experience under diverse and trying circumstances.

Another two hours had passed when to Jennison's acute ears there came the soft plop of hoofs sinking in the heavy dust of the road. Horses were approaching from the direction of Sour Dough, and it did not require the acumen of a seer to divine who bestrode them. There was no hurry in their advance. A long ten minutes elapsed before the shadowy riders stood revealed against the black sky.

There were four of them. Halting now at the edge of the road, and certainly not more than a dozen feet from Old Bat, one of them whistled softly. Almost immediately the door to the barroom was opened. Bunton emerged and approached the group of horsemen. "That you, Dill?" he asked guardedly.

"Life size," Gantz assured him in low tones. "Is your guest safe and sound yet?"

"Yet's right!" Bunton chuckled evilly. "Though I'm bound to state that his nap was just about up. Fact is, the only thing that saved him was his droppin' the innocent remark that he told Bill Tuggle where he was goin' to pass the night. Of course I felt sure you'd be along but even so I was gettin' a little mite restless. Git down, an' I'll 'lucidate the situation."

The four dismounted, and, gathering in a close knot about the road-house keeper, listened attentively while he briefly described Jennison's arrival and the subsequent events including the visit from the miners.

"We saw where they was camped up here two or three miles," Gantz remarked indifferently. Immediately his mind turned to Old Bat. "So he's roostin' in that little storeroom," he meditated. "He sure picked a nice place for our business."

"Couldn't be better," another man declared, satisfaction bulking large in his growling undertone. "Like a rat trap."

"Just so," Bunton agreed. "One man oughta stake himself right outside the winder while the rest of us bust in the door. There's a chunk of log layin' thar by the side of the house that'll sure make a sizeable key for that lock. Let's be at it."

"Wait a minute, boys," Gantz cautioned. "That little wart is purty smart. Chances is that he sleeps with one ear cocked open and should he hear us, like as not he'll heave a little lead in our direction. No use takin' extry chances."

"Looks to me kinda," one of them scoffed, "that five men oughta be able to subdue *one*."

"Blub," Gantz opined witheringly. "You walk on your hind legs and gobble grub, an' in some ways act like a human—only you don't think."

Blub subsided into a dignified silence and after a moment Gantz went on to outline his plans.

"Streatch," he ordered, "you sneak 'round and gum yourself to that winder. The rest of us'll pull off our boots so we don't make too much noise. Blub and Zeke'll handle the log. That leaves me and Squint to do the shootin'. But we need a light, too."

"I've got a candle here," Bunton interrupted.

"That's thinkin', Zeke," Gantz praised him. "Here, give it to me and the performance is ready to begin."

While the four men were drawing off their boots Streatch took up his position by the window at which Jennison could not repress a grim smile. He heard the faint rasp of a match and saw it held guardedly in Gantz's cupped hand while the candle flickered into life. Then it disappeared inside the barroom while in its illumination was shadowed the forms —first, Gantz, then the nondescript called Squint, and next the burly giants, Bunton and Blub, bearing the massive section of log. Tripping lightly on their heels followed their predestined victim, stifling something like faint regret that so well laid plans were destined to such

barren results. Peering warily in at a crevice between the ill-fitting logs Jennison held the whole sinister panorama in dim review. In one hand Gantz clasped the guttering candle whose fluttering flame, as the night breeze gently caressed it, gave fitful views, now clear, now shadowy, of the big room. Before the closed door of the tiny storeroom, the log resting horizontally in their big, capable hands, Jennison noted Bunton and Blub, while Gantz and his companion crouched near the floor, guns clutched in eager fingers waiting for the zero second of attack.

Old Bat observed the muzzle of Gantz' pistol wag a terse signal. The log catapult was put instantly into action; and as the assaulted door crashed inward Gantz and Squint followed, their guns spitting fire at his tumbled blankets. It ceased as by magic, for Gantz had discovered that the room was tenantless. A tense silence fell on the smoke filled room for his inquisitive eye noted the canteen—and the pool of dried blood!

Without a word he picked up the heavy receptacle and carried it out into the barroom, heaved it up on the bar, and very deliberately set the candle down beside it. Streatch came hurrying around to join them, and Jennison, flattened against the base log, easily could have tripped him as his big feet went pounding by. As Streatch lumbered in at the open door Old Bat once more glued his sharp eye to the friendly peephole.

Gantz did not hurry, but with methodical care unhooked the buckles on both sides of the canteen, gripped it by its lower end and with one tantalizing tug emptied the contents out in a steep sided cone on top of the bar. Then, with a slow reflective motion, he dropped the empty canteen and raised his eyes to the dumfounded group of men.

"Jest sand!" Streatch mumbled, eyes goggling in unbelieving amazement.

"Them's the first intelligent words from you in quite a spell," Gantz remarked as he reached out and in a detached sort of way strained a handful of the sand through his long thin fingers. "Jest sand," lingering on the thought, "but a good quality anyway."

He turned his penetrating glance on Bunton. "That blood in there on the floor" he remarked half interrogatively.

"It dripped from a quarter of beef I had hung up there yesterday," Bunton answered readily, though evidently puzzled by Gantz's tone.

"And he didn't object to it?" Gantz continued evenly, "when you bunked him in there?"

"Not a word," Bunton assured him. "Why?"

Gantz did not answer the question but instead said in a meditative way, "I'm wonderin' now. Blood on the floor, man gone. Canteen thar all right, but instead of gold dust, *filled with jest sand!*"

His subtle insinuations at last penetrated through Bunton's lumbering brain. A dull red slowly suffused his swarthy cheeks. "You meanin' to insinuate, Dill," he demanded harshly, "that I double-crossed you?"

At the incisive question Gantz' lethargy vanished like magic. With a dazzling motion he thrust the muzzle of his revolver against Bunton's stomach and his cold, gray eyes bored remorselessly into the blazing eyes of the aroused inn keeper.

"Don't wiggle!" he barked sharply, "or I'll blow your guts clean through your back bone!"

Now without turning he addressed one of the dumfounded men.

"Blub," he ordered, "go out and get my lariat."

Blub obeyed with amazing alacrity, to return in double quick time with the fifty foot rope dangling in his dirty hand.

"I guess this will answer our purpose," Gantz remarked coolly as he indicated a six-inch supporting post of red fir extending from floor to peak of roof, which stood just in front of the bar.

With the revolver caressing his waistband Bunton was backed up against this novel snubbing post and bound securely with coil upon coil of the hair lariat. Yet his superb nerve never failed him. "I suppose," he remarked evenly, "that you're goin' to murder me for something I ain't done."

"Zeke," Gantz answered coldly, "a man can't double cross me and live. Jest wait," he interrupted Bunton's furious attempt to deny the charge, "while I make it plain. Nine of us started in on this stage robbin' and so forth, agree-

in' to stand together and share equal in everything. And that means *stand* together. You're the second man to fall down on that said agreement for, tonight, afore we left Sour Dough, I plugged Bill Tuggle."

"Why?" Bunton cut in explosively.

"Because we had a purty good hunch he was weakenin'. His case's a little diffrunt from yourn, but not much. Still I'll give you one chance. *Where's that gold dust?*"

"I don't know a damned thing more'n I've told you," Bunton said doggedly.

"Meanin' you won't tell *yet*," Gantz nodded. "Well, I'll try the effigy of one thing or another that mebby'll stir up your memory some."

The men were grouped in front of the bar, faces away from the outside door and Old Bat seized the opportunity to slip inside and noiseless as a shadow glide along the wall to a scarcely illuminated corner.

Without a doubt he could have shot the four bandits before they could have raised a finger in opposition, but his ingrained sense of fair play would not allow it. Now unnoticed he watched the inquisition, which even for him quickly developed a novel trend. Gantz, reaching over grasped Bunton's shirt and ripped it away revealing a great hummock of chest covered closely with kinky black hair. Again he was speaking in an almost detached impersonal way that added to its sinister import.

"Zeke," he queried, "You've butchered hogs afore now. Remember how you split their breastbones with a ax, don't you? I see you do. Wall, this knffe'll do since I ain't got no ax handy."

He exhibited a long bladed dirk, keen of point and razored of edge, holding it close before Bunton's fascinated eyes, while the light shed by the flickering candle glanced evilly from its polished blade. He shifted his gun until he gripped it by the long blue barrel.

"With these tools," he added, "I'm goin' to open you up from chin to belly band; that is unless you're willin' to dig up that gold dust!"

"How would the *man* do?"

At that startling interrogatory the four outlaws whirled about to find themselves confronting a grim-faced little man standing quite at ease, thumbs hooked with seeming carelessness over the waistband of his trousers. That staring inspection lasted scarce a clipped second. Then like a flash, their hands streaked for their pistols. Someone surged against the bar, sending the candle spinning. As the light winked out Old Bat fired twice, his bullets were crossed in mid-air by two others, then he glided noiselessly to the floor. He heard a double slithering sound as the two bandits followed his example, but the slower collapsing sprawl of the other pair coupled with a coughing grunt, spaced perceptibly from a burbling sigh, told him that his two bullets had found their marks.

Yet he had not escaped unscathed, for a numbing pain creeping through his left arm and the steady coursing of blood down over his hand amply testified to his wound. The ominous silence held and his active brain visualized clearly the two uninjured outlaws crouched in the darkness, alert and waiting for the slightest sound that would betray his position. The steady drain of blood making action on his part imperative, he resorted to a desperate expedient. Working the fingers of his left hand loose from the sticky handle of his gun and holding his right tense for instant service, Jennison tossed the useless revolver over into a distant corner. As it clattered loudly to the floor, from the darkness across the room there darted a tongue of flame. Instantly Jennison drove a bullet sharply beneath the livid arrow, to be crossed in an infinitesimal second by a darting reply from the second outlaw. Old Bat felt his head driven back against the wall by the impact; yet his indomitable will held him to his grim purpose, for as his senses reeled he fired pointblank under the streaking flame. Then as he slid in dimming unconsciousness to the floor there flickered through his mind the possibility that if Bunton freed himself, Jennison's work *was* certainly finished!

Consciousness returned slowly heralded by a whisky-tainted odor accompanied by the muttering meditation.

"If he ain't already dead now, chances are he will be purty quick. Anyway I guess he saved my life. Accidental mebby, but anyway he saved it."

Old Bat divined that it was Zeke Bunton arguing with himself as to whether he should put the finishing touches to the indomitable little man

whose dramatic intervention had saved his life. Evidently he decided on the negative, for Jennison heard him heave a sigh of regret; then he turned away and clumped to the other side of the room. With an effort Jennison opened his blood encrusted eyelids and peered warily about. Gray dawn illuminated the barroom with its faint light, limning its ghastly interior in a monstrous way. The room was a shambles, and the four bodies piled up in grotesque fashion testified to the uncanny accuracy of Old Bat's aim. Bunton, still communing with himself, had shambled over toward the bar, his huge head swinging from side to side like that of some giant bear. Once he paused to direct a heavy glance in Jennison's direction, then he turned his attention to the heavy bar. Gripping one end in his big hands, he made as if to move it, when something stayed him.

With his hands still resting on the end of the bar, he canted his head to listen. The sound was now unmistakable, the tattoo of rapidly advancing hoofbeats coming from the direction of Sour Dough. Bunton apparently concluded that it boded no good to him, for with a wild scramble he crossed the barroom, leaped through the open doorway and doubled along the side of the roadhouse in a desperate effort to escape.

His appearance was greeted with a wild yell, and guns began to pop. Jennison heard Bunton fire twice in reply, a second fusillade followed and then someone called out exultantly: "Bedad, that fetched him! Make sure though 'tis not a bluff he's pullin'."

"Fleharty," Old Bat sighed happily. "Well I guess it's about time he came."

The Irishman hesitated at the open door and glanced within. As his eyes took in the ghastly scene, he remarked to another man standing at his elbow, "'Tis plain Jim Hood's been doing business on an extensive style," adding wistfully, "but where's the little man now, I wonder?"

Through his voice, freighted with anxiety, there ran the thread of exultation and pride at the evidence of his friend's prowess with a gun.

"Over here, Dennis," Old Bat called out weakly.

Fleharty raced across the room and dropped by the little man's side, his companion following rapidly behind. "Praises be! 'Tis neither dead nor dyin' that I find ye, Jim Hood," the Irishman shouted, "though they have been afther givin' ye a permanent part to yer hair."

Without pausing in his hurried survey of Jennison's wounds he cast a rapid question over his shoulder at another man who had just entered.

"That Bunton, now?"

"Dead as a mackerel," the newcomer announced calmly.

"'Tis well," Fleharty nodded comfortably, his nimble fingers busy with their task.

In a short time they had Old Bat well bandaged; and after being fortified with a stiff drink of whisky, he sketched briefly the story of his night's adventure. "It was sure worth something," he added with a chuckle, "to watch them empty out that sand. Gantz sure looked pained."

"'Twas a smart trick ye played, Jim Hood," Fleharty praised him. "I took the dust ye exchanged at my cabin for the sand, up to the stage driver. 'Twill be down this day."

"We'd 'a' got down here quicker," one of the men spoke up, "but Dennis here said you told him not to leave for a hour after Gantz and his crew lit out. What was the big idee?"

"I wanted to give them a chance to talk among themselves when I could hear them," Jennison explained. "Might learn where they cached their dust and so forth."

"Did you?" the other questioned.

"No," Jennison responded, "but I'm nursin' a notion I know where Bunton cached his'n, anyway. If you'll move that furder end of the bar a mite, we'll soon know."

Two of the men hastened to hoist the heavy bar aside, revealing a neat cavity beneath, a rapid rifling of which yielded a sum in dust and nuggets roughly estimated at fifteen thousand dollars.

"I reckon that oughta go to the express company," Jennison stated, "to kinda take the place of what Gantz and his gang lifted offen them."

"I reckon," one of the explorers of the cache agreed a little regretfully, "though finders oughta be keepers sometimes."

"Not in this case," Jennison said firmly.

When the stage rattled up on its way to Walla Walla, they bundled Jennison aboard with awkward tenderness, and a day later he was back at Acme. Milt Scougal, his friend and quondam partner received him with open arms and under his unstinted, if somewhat clumsy care, Old Bat thrived amazingly.

Here at Scougal's cabin, James Hildebrand, the division superintendent, found him when a week or so later he dropped off at Acme to see how he was getting along. "Mr. Jennison," he smiled in greeting, "you're certainly a lively looking corpse. How are you anyway?"

Jennison removed his pipe before he answered quaintly, "Slightly disfigured but still in the ring. Trouble though," he added, "there ain't no ring."

"That's true," Hildebrand nodded emphatically. "You certainly did a job up there. We can carry the gold out now without opposition."

Jennison agreed that this was so. "Anyway," he finished, "'till a new gang appears on the scene."

Then at Hildebrand's urging he related the story of the outlaws' undoing.

"I don't believe we settled on any compensation," Hildebrand remarked at the close of the terse narrative. "What do you think to five thousand dollars?"

"My judgment is," Old Bat declared honestly, "that it's a lot too much."

"We don't!" the superintendent disagreed, "so we'll leave it there. Beaumont will pay you any time you're ready to collect it."

"Well," Jennison capitulated with a dry smile, "if you think a week's work is worth five thousand dollars, I should fret, I reckon. Still my private opinion, publicly expressed is, that it's too much."

"We're satisfied," the superintendent stated. He sat silent a moment before directing another question at Jennison. "What made you suspect Tuggle?" he queried.

"Can't just exactly say," Old Bat replied. "Only he showed a leetle mite too much interest in the way I was goin', and so forth. Some way I had a hunch he was crooked from the turn loose. The final shindy proved I was right."

Hildebrand nodded slowly, then glanced at his watch and got up to go. At the door he lingered.

"Mr. Jennison," he declared, "when I came to see you about going up there, you said that it was a one man job. You certainly *were* that man! Good-day!"

SAVAGE REVOLVERS

THE Savage revolver came into being in the early '60s, a number being furnished to the Union troops during the Civil War; these were made by the predecessors of the present Savage Arms Company.

This percussion revolver sidestepped the patents existing, whereby the revolving of the cylinder by the movement of the hammer was protected, by revolving the cylinder and cocking the hammer by pulling a long ringed trigger with the middle finger and firing by a pull at a second and smaller trigger with the index finger.

Savage endeavored to prevent the escape of gas between cylinder and barrel and insuring absolute alignment of cylinder chamber and barrel, by tapering the rear end of the barrel and flaring the muzzle of the chambers and imparting an initial rearward motion of about one-eighth inch to the cylinder before it began to revolve and a final forward motion, engaging the two parts, before the piece was ready to fire.

The excessive weight, unusual and awkward shape, and the easily jammed mechanism, together with the complication of operating two triggers, caused its rejection by the gun buying public and consequent abandonment of manufacture after but a limited number had been marketed.

M. L. WEAVER.

LITTLE BROTHER WITH A BASS VOICE

I'm a ruffian rat from the desert,
I'm a sourdough from Dawson an' Nome,
I'm a waddy from Wyoming's ranges,
I'm a Mountie, the muskeg my home.
I'm a Ranger, a-ridin' the Rio,
I'm the sheriff that's sent to arrest,
I'm the rodeo buckaroo champion—
Hell, pardner, yuh know me; I'm WEST!

FOR years tales of the great West published in SHORT STORIES magazine, and more lately in THE FRONTIER, have won an increasing press of admirers. The publishers, Doubleday, Page & Company, have been besieged by countless hundreds of letters from reader friends, asking that a greater and still greater quantity of this quality of stories be included in each issue of the two established magazines.

To as great an extent as seemed possible—always preserving the integrity of the ideas upon which the success of these two magazines was founded—the editors were delighted indeed to follow the trend of popular demand.

But a limit was reached, one at which no greater percentage of Western fiction could be added—unless SHORT STORIES and THE FRONTIER were to go out of character, to become Western fiction magazines strictly.

So the publishers decided upon the new magazine, WEST, and began a survey of the field of authors—commenced quietly to select stories. Here is the first issue, a straightforward attempt to place in your hands a truly fine magazine in the 15¢ size, one which shall be built always of the *finest possible materials in the field of Western fiction!*

That's a pledge. With the resources of a long established publishing house to draw upon, this youngster, like Hercules, has been able to start with a head of hair, a full set of teeth, and a bass voice. Still, we can promise that the timbre of that voice is going to deepen steadily to *profundo*. One method by which tillicums can help enormously in making it heard throughout the world, is by writing us your full and frank opinion of WEST. SHORT STORIES and THE FRONTIER always have invited stern censure as well as praise, and where a shower of bricks was being hurled felt pride in standing up and taking it. Such will be the policy and pride of WEST.

THE SPIRIT LIVES

OUT there they still need men who won't run from dry-gulchers and rustlers. The following clipping from the New York *Evening World* of November 10th, 1925, tells a terse story of a sort which was an everyday item well into the first decade of the twentieth century, and which still occurs.

San Bernardino, Calif., Nov. 10. (A.P.) Matt Burts and Bill Roberts, two of the few remaining two-gunmen of the weird desert vastness that centers at Government holes, have met and shot it out. Both died with their boots on in this last stand of the old type gunmen in Southern California.

The scene was 230 miles northeast of San Bernardino, in the wild region near where Nevada, Arizona and California have a common boundary line at the Colorado River.

That it was a duel, possibly over a water hole, which ended in the double tragedy, was reported by Deputy Sheriff Jack Brown in a telegram to Sheriff W. A. Shay.

Roberts recently was employed as a foreman of the Rock Springs Cattle Company because "he was a man who wouldn't run," the company has advised the sheriff.

For many years foremen on the big cattle

range that reaches for thirty miles among the bleak hills of California's last frontier had been run out by gunmen. A successful foreman had to face sniping and general gunplay.

Recently Roberts returned to the ranch-house and found that during his absence in the night thirty bullet holes had been put through the house. It had happened many other times to Roberts' predecessors.

Apparently Burts and Roberts met at Roberts' house, said the sheriff; and neither would run. Six-shooters went into action, and both men fell.

A MAN OF SAN ANTONE

J. FRANK DAVIS, who used to be an Eastern newspaper man before he devoted his time exclusively to fiction writing, took up his residence in Texas fifteen years ago and still makes his home in San Antonio. Of the 150 short stories and close to twenty magazine serials that he has written, fully half have dealt, at least in part, with Texas Rangers and ex-Rangers.

Of "The End of the Trail," which appears in this issue, he writes:

"While it is, of course, pure fiction, there is ample ground in Texas realities for the story. Homicide, under certain rules of justification which are relics of earlier days, is still not uncommon in the Southwest, and public sentiment is still very tolerant of the taking of human life on occasion and for causes of certain sorts. This being the case, the pardoning of men who have killed ("killer" is a more common word than "murderer" in Texas) is not so notable a thing there as it would be in more northern communities.

"Nor is it an unheard of thing for a feud to exist between a Texas Ranger and a sheriff or other peace officer. The Ranger holds his authority under the governor, with orders received direct from the adjutant-general of the state. Sheriffs and city policemen hold their authority from county or municipality. It is inevitable that at times they conflict, and while usually the consequent feuds do not go as far as to involve violence, they sometimes make for much friction. It is only a few months ago that a citizen of San Antonio, after rangers had pursued a policy in that city that many residents did not approve, sought by injunction to have the ranger corps abolished—and startled the state by winning his case in a lower court, although higher tribunals later reversed this decision!

"Texas sheriffs, as a class, are not willing to back down, and have a reputation of finishing what they start. Texas Rangers are selected for their ability to carry out orders at whatever risk and cost may be necessary.

"Many years ago there is said to have been a Texas governor who, during the political campaign, had been violently attacked on the stump by a district attorney who at one time had sent to the gallows and penitentiary a gang of murderers and horsethieves. And it is claimed that not long after entering the executive office the governor pardoned the survivors of this gang, perhaps knowing they had promised, if and when they got out, to kill the district attorney. Whereupon they proceeded to do their best to make good. That their experience was disheartening is indicated by the fact that some of the details of the matter were told me by the quiet elderly gentleman who, in those days of his hot youth, was the district attorney in question. (His details were sketchy and hazy in spots. Supplied by others, they indicated that he was very, very quick on the draw.)

"I had that ancient incident in mind when I devised the plot of "The End of the Trail." The rest took care of itself."

WESTERN IDIOM

IN A future issue we shall begin, right here, a glossary of the words and phrases used through the regions from which our story settings come. Even to those of us who have lived the greater part of our lifetimes in one section or another of the West, colorful idioms from another range or another country may lack full weight.

For instance, an Arizona cowboy would look in pitying wonder at a tenderfoot who innocently inquired what were chaparejos. And yet that cowboy might be at a distinct loss to explain the phrase "spud in"—words as familiar as yes and no, to Montana and Texas oil men. Likewise chrysotile, a term always on the tongue of the asbestos prospector, likely would cause oil men to shrug.

For completeness and entire accuracy

in such a glossary, we need the help of readers, of course. Any strange word sent in will be explained according to the views of authorities; and also readers' letters anent new words and curious quirks of speech, will be published.

We intend to make this brief department a live and interesting affair—*not* a dead compilation of what has gone before.

Of course disagreements may arise. We expect them—fact, rather look forward to 'em! A good scrap always can count us among its customers.

But let's have your views, your curiosities!

A HOULIHAN

THE frontispiece in each issue of this magazine will present a painting in reproduction—an action picture taken from the very heart of the West by a master artist. Later a series of old prints, showing the country, people and customs as they appeared to early contemporaries, will be run.

This time the excellent painting by William R. Leigh, depicts a situation all too common when roping a heavy steer gone "on the prod." A quick turn has tangled the rope about the cowboy's bronc. A jerking pull then has thrown the animal from balance. Both bronc and rider face a heavy fall into the dry wash below them.

THE CHUCK-WAGON

Come all you young waddies,
I'll sing you a song;
Stand back from the wagon—
Stay where you belong;
I've heard you observin'
I'm fussy and slow,
While you're punchin' cattle,
And I'm punchin' dough.

From "Songs of the Cowboys"
Compiled by Jack Thorpe.

FELLERS, bein' roundup cook, sorta, of this here outfit, I been nominated by the boss to spill some glad news. As a speechifier, I'm larripin' good with a fryin' pan; but *any* hombre kin spill good news. It's the bad news what takes the talent. Mine's good news, so grin if yuh wanta. Stand close, now, an' get yore six-year molars sunburnt, an' yore ribs shook loose, from laughin'!

Yuh all know how matters been goin' with the DP brand. All the calf critters this year was twins; mavericks just a-beggin' to be adopted was plenty thick; whitefaces has been bringing seventy at the shipping pens; an' the gramma, bunch grass an' tobosa stands knee high now on the winter range.

I ain't blushin' a bit over the chuck I jest give yuh; I eat it m'self, an' darned if I don't like it! The boss says loosen up, though, an' pervide the boys the best fodder a-goin'. So lissen!

Next time I bang on this here dishpan there's goin' to be a feast right, for yuh waddies! Because a lot of yuh are a-waitin', I'll tell yuh fust off, there's the second big chunk of "Manacled Millions," Hamby's hi-yu novel of Utah copper. Cutting a pie like this'n in jest four sections is plumb satisfyin', I'd say.

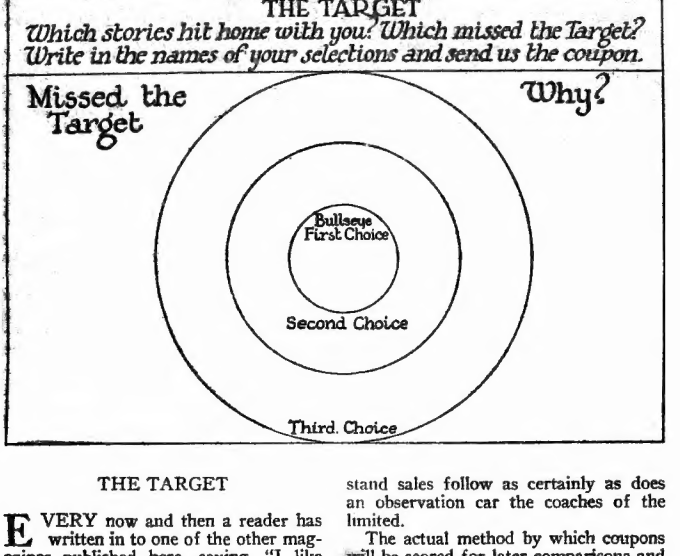
There ain't any really big doin's held in the West nowadays, without one hard ridin' ex-puncher bein' present. Know the jigger I mean? Sure, Clem Yore! Clem's a friend to all of yuh, so I'll jest go on record as sayin' Clem's give up ridin' herd on dogies; but he sure knows how to build a mean loop of words! This time WEST starts off the new issue with his hell-hootin' complete novel of the outlaw range, "Six-Shooter Strategy."

But there's still four-five kinds of red meat jest kinda seared around the edges, a-comin'. Lissen!

Thomson Burtis an' his gang of Mex border air patrol flyers are old *compadres;* if I jest whisper this here yarn's a novelette of Sleepy Spears, called "Brad Bucks the Border," yo're hep an' no doubt of it!

Jay Lucas, Walter A. Sinclair, Erle Stanley Gardner and Murray Leinster all are on the menu; and also, Charles Alden Seltzer comes through with one of the smoothest yarns of a sheriff and a rustler yuh ever read. It's "Like A Gentleman," and besides some gentlemanly qualities, it shore holds a kick and a deep down chuckle.

So come a-r'arin', fellers, when next yuh hear me bang the ol' pan, because this is skookum chuck, an' I don't wanta throw it aw-a-a-ay!



THE TARGET

EVERY now and then a reader has written in to one of the other magazines published here, saying, "I like all your stories, but never send in the coupons simply because I don't want to do an injustice to any of the authors."

Well, we hope and plan to print only yarns good enough in every way so practically every reader will thoroughly enjoy every story. That is an ideal impossible of complete fulfillment, however; and to aid in having us near it, a reader can give splendid coöperation simply by writing in his or her likes and dislikes. In that we can have a basis for emphasizing the work of a favorite author, and going light upon the stories of one not liked as well. That is justice, and satisfaction.

Every coupon sent in, and every comment made by a reader, is read and talked over by the editors. Sales of a magazine are, of course, a fair enough criterion of that magazine's success in pleasing a wide circle; but the basing of a magazine's policy upon reports not obtained in full until several months after the issue has been placed on sale, is a cold, impersonal and largely unsatisfactory method. We have found that if policy follows the coupons, the newsstand sales follow as certainly as does an observation car the coaches of the limited.

The actual method by which coupons will be scored for later comparisons and computations, is as follows.

Bullseye, 3 points
Second choice, 2 points
Third choice, 1 point
Adverse vote, minus one point

Thus, if any given story in this issue appeals most strongly to 100 readers, each of whom sends in a coupon, that particular tale will reach 300. Suppose the next 100 coupons rate it second. Then we will add 200 points, making a total of 500. Fifty readers rate it third. All right—50 added to 500—550.

But (for sake of illustration, let's say) twenty-five readers vote adversely—decide that the tale misses the target. Score then a minus 25, leaving a grand total of 525.

Dividing the total score by the total number of coupons received for that issue of the magazine (275), gives 1.90, the final comparative rating of the story.

On this last figure the popularity or lack thereof of an author's work, is judged.

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Sontag of Sundown. W. C. Tuttle. An exciting story of the question of ranch ownership—which promoted bloodshed and a war of no mean caliber.

Spawn of the Desert. W. C. Tuttle. Where men lived raw in the desert's noon and hell was nothing to shun; where they buried 'em neat, without preacher or sheet and writ on their tombstone crude but sweet, "This Jasper was slow with his gun."

Arizona Argonauts. H. Bedford-Jones. Three adventurers whose fortunes lead through drought and danger to the golden goal they sought.

The Lure of Piper's Glen. Theodore Goodridge Roberts. It was the lure of the North, of plentiful game and of the clear wind from the great plains. Young Jim Todhunter heard it.

Apache Valley. Arthur Chapman. A story of a cattle war in the Southwest, with all it means—terror and blood feud; alarms by night and day; rustling and stealthy murder.

The Challenge of the North. James B. Hendryx. This is a story of the call of the great Northland; of purposes and cross purposes; of true men and of "bad" men.

The Second Mate. H. Bedford-Jones. Peril and mutiny on the China Seas. Two white women at the mercy of a villainous crew. Jim Barnes realized the desperate chance when he became mate of the **Sulu Queen.**

The Devil's Payday. W. C. Tuttle
A sky of brass, the sun a flame,
And the land no place to dwell;
A hunk of earth, so doggone hot
That it still belongs to Hell.

OVER 100 000 sets of these twelve gripping fascinating books have found their way into the hearts of live wide-awake folks who enjoy real smashing red-blooded tales. And here is your opportunity to get these twelve great books without a penny in advance. You can also keep them five days to decide for yourself if they are not the most daring, exciting books you ever read.

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If you decide to keep the charger, start making the small payments of only $2.50 a month until you've paid the total price of only $19.50. That's the price others ask for spot cash. We give you the lowest cash price on easy monthly payments you'll never feel. The money you save in charging your battery at home will almost take care of the payments on this offer.

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